



## Some foreign language issues in Primary CLIL: the teacher's voice

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### Abstract

*Throughout Europe CLIL is being considered an innovative way of promoting foreign language learning in the Primary school. Such a choice however has repercussions on the way teaching is done, as the choice to use the foreign language as a medium of instruction opens up a series of issues related to the children (e.g., comprehension of input, language use) and to the teachers (e.g., knowledge of language and content, teaching strategies for solving language and content problems). Using the results of the EUCLID project, the paper focuses on the language issue from the perspective of the teacher (as language user and language teacher) to highlight two possible problems that CLIL poses for the foreign language teacher teaching in CLIL mode: the teaching focus and the language and content connection. To illustrate the issues voice is given to the teachers' own comments.*

### 1. Introduction

The requirement that all European citizens be competent in at least two foreign languages (Fourth General Objective, European Commission, 1995, pp. 47-49 [1]) has resulted in all European countries elaborating adequate language education policies and in adopting suitable, even innovative, teaching approaches that are capable of promoting this. The response has seen the introduction of foreign languages at Primary school level on the understanding that an early start to foreign language learning is a better guarantee for learning than has hitherto been the case – as theories in second language acquisition indicate when discussing the critical period (Dulay, Burt, Krashen, 1982, pp.78-92 [2]). Methodologies appropriate for early foreign language teaching have been developed and materials made available which, given the increasing influence of ICT, are also freely available on-line for use not only in school but also out of school, at home. Notwithstanding, the desired quality of learning is proving difficult to achieve.

Thus, in addition to approaches that focus on the language as a system, a wave of interest is currently running throughout Europe concerning the possibility of using the foreign language as a medium of instruction (henceforth FLMI). The interest is based on the conviction that learning a foreign language whilst learning non-language content impacts on the quality of the foreign language competence itself: the learner uses the language to grapple with concepts and activate thinking skills with the result that his competence acquires a cognitive depth that is normally lacking, especially at the early stages of learning. Furthermore, the approach encapsulates principles of second language learning such as:

- Krashen's 'forgetting principle' (Krashen, 1982 [3]): the learner's attention is so focused on the message as not to notice the language it is elaborated in. This constitutes a situation where acquisition as opposed to learning (Krashen's distinction) can take place, with greater beneficial effects therefore on the development of the learner's competence. The concept is captured in the following teacher's remark:

They're not stopping and thinking: 'What does that mean in Spanish?' [...] because they think they are learning Maths, not that they are learning a language ... (Advisory teacher, focus group discussion)

- 'meaningful learning' (Ausubel, 1963) [4]: the learner is involved in activities that are not only 'meaningful' to him (he perceives their relevance) but that are also 'meaning-based', namely they focus on topics or themes of the subject matter. Wolff (1997) [5] postulates that such a situation leads to greater in depth learning;



- input: the FLMI situation is capable of providing greater quantities of input essential for language development;

- authenticity: found in the way the language is used, in its natural role of 'doing things with words'.

It is possible to glimpse in FLMI aspects that are potentially attractive to the learner (perception of relevance, forgetting principle) who is as a result more engaged (cf. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis).

Whilst throughout Europe generally there has been a tendency to implement FLMI at secondary levels of education there are now signs that interest is underway in devising FLMI programmes for the primary school. Whatever the school level however, merely using the foreign language as a medium will not guarantee the development of the learner's foreign language competence commensurate with the length of the experience (as research by Swain, Lapkin, 1982 [6] in the immersion programmes in Canada has shown). An awareness of this lies behind the elaboration in the 1990s of the CLIL acronym (content and language integrated learning) which recognises the dual-focussed nature of FLMI programmes and highlights the necessity that care be taken to guarantee that both content and language be learnt simultaneously, the one through the other, in an integrated manner.

By highlighting this, we can see that a CLIL teaching (and learning) environment is different from a 'normal' subject matter teaching/learning environment as normally the latter is not dual-focused and does not set itself language goals (although a 'language across the curriculum' (LAC) approach would advise otherwise); we can also see that the CLIL approach is different from any foreign language teaching approach or method as they too are not dual-focussed and do not set themselves subject matter goals. A CLIL environment therefore sets a challenge as it requires teachers to change or reappraise consolidated practice.

## 2. Language issues as seen by the teachers

In this paper we will report on two aspects concerning the language issue in CLIL, viewed from the teacher's perspective. The issue is just one of the many that were considered by the EUCLID project<sup>1</sup> which had the overall aim of creating training packages for primary school teachers wishing to initiate CLIL programmes. In order to be able to devise the training packages, information was required concerning the teaching competences required for such teaching. The decision of the EUCLID partners was to combine theoretical knowledge from the existing literature (very few references to foreign language CLIL for the Primary school situation exist however, but see the electronic bibliography put together by the EUCLID group on their site: <http://primaryclil.org/>) with a bottom up, empirical approach whereby data was collected from those with varying degrees of experience of such programmes (called 'experts') and those starting for the first time (called 'novices'). Data were collected through questionnaires and discussions (virtual or real) with experts in the five partner countries and with the self-evaluations and forum discussions during the initial training session of the novices. By giving voice to the teachers, the project got concrete indications as to what they feel is needed, what changes have to be introduced, what the difficulties are and where the pitfalls lie. The data not only served for the creation of the training packages but also to elaborate the Primary CLIL teacher competences profile.

For reasons of space, we report on the language issue from two points of view only: the teaching focus and the language and content connection, leaving aside important issues such as assessment, and strategies and procedures to promote pupil language production in Primary CLIL (cf. Coonan, electronic article on the PrimaryCLIL internet site).

### 2.1 The teaching focus

A latent pitfall in the CLIL situation is connected with the professional profile of the CLIL teacher. The CLIL teacher in the Primary school is, generally, a foreign language specialist. The danger for this

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<sup>1</sup> EUCLID-APPC\_142328-UK-CNP LLP 01/09/2008 (2008-2010). Partners: coordinating Institution Liverpool Hope University, England; Universidad De Sevilla, Spain; University of Chester, England; Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy; Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, Berlin, Germany; Jagiellonian University. Krakow, Poland.



teacher is to lose sight of the fact that CLIL teaching is not language teaching but subject matter teaching. The challenge for the foreign language specialist is to keep this in mind at all times - s/he must not resort to teaching the language but create the conditions for it to be learnt. The following quote is eloquent in this regard:

*... you have to look at it in totally different way...you have to remember that you're not teaching language, you're teaching a concept – you had to keep reminding me that we're not teaching vocabulary [...], so you really do have to look at the objectives carefully [...]; if they come away from the lesson not knowing the Spanish word for a light bulb, that's not a problem as long as they know that electricity needs a circuit to flow. You have to begin with the curriculum objectives; as a language teacher, I found that difficult. (Advisory teacher, focus group)*

Attention to form should be present in the manner it would naturally be present in a 'normal' subject lesson. However, the CLIL teacher can fall into the trap of 'overdoing it': by using error correction procedures typically found in the foreign language lesson or by giving exercises that require the application of language knowledge rather than subject knowledge/competence. The following is a typical example (transcription of a video recording of a novice's CLIL lesson). The children in pairs read a cue card where the *actual language* that they are to use is provided:

#### CUE CARD

Have a conversation about energy sources by following this dialogue:

Pair work: Petrol

A. *Is petrol a renewable source of energy?*

B. *No, it isn't.*

A. *Does it give any carbon emission?*

B. *No, it doesn't.*

Exchange roles and do the same dialogue above with:

- solar energy.
- hydrogen.
- water power.
- wind energy.
- oil.

This activity – presented towards the end of a CLIL lesson on 'Renewable energy' - is in the form of a mini-dialogue where, on the basis of a given model, the pupils carry out a substitution exercise using names of different energy sources (provided) and the language structures '*No, it isn't/No, it doesn't*' (both provided) - a very typical pair work activity in the audio-lingual or situational method fashion. It is difficult to see where content learning comes into the picture, apart from the vocabulary which is however presented in its linguistic rather than conceptual dimension.

We do not want to say however that the language must not be taught. On the contrary, space needs to be found to prepare the pupils for the CLIL lessons: this can take the form of parallel language lessons, language sessions prior to the CLIL module, or even a language-focussed introductory session within the CLIL lesson/unit itself. The point is that the above activity is presented as focussing on content but misses the target – it only focuses on language practice.

## 2.2 Language and content connection

As the CLIL teachers involved in the EUCLID project were mostly language specialists, the foreign language competence of the teacher was not seen as an issue. Rather the issue concerned the ability to manage the language in the CLIL situation:

I found it difficult to gauge the language, to adapt it to the content and I found I didn't have the strategies to do so. (Novice a: self-evaluation questionnaire)

I really don't feel I know how to adequately adapt the language to the content... (Novice b, self-evaluation questionnaire)

The problems are related to the content:

a. the requirement that language objectives be derived from the content (instead of the other way round). In addition, the teacher has to define objectives that also take account of the thinking skills to





be developed with the content. All this means that the teacher has to deal with language that s/he would not normally touch upon in a normal language teaching situation because considered too complex;

b. insufficient knowledge on the part of the teacher of the subject matter, especially the specific vocabulary and subject matter pedagogy. Teachers need to know how to choose curriculum content which is not only 'suitable' for CLIL but which they are also able deal with. A language specialist may not have the preparation:

... I'm a bit uncertain about the subject matter objectives. Personally, I'm an English specialist and I don't have the necessary knowledge of the subject 'Music' nor of any of the other subjects that are taught at the primary school so I'm finding it a bit difficult. (Novice c, self-evaluation)

c. the need to render the input accessible to the pupils. This can be done through language strategies such as paraphrase, repetition, and reformulation, and also through teaching strategies where verbal language is substituted by the non-verbal actions and aids. What results is a content lesson that can be quite different from what it is normally:

.. we had lots of actions, everything was visual. I had to make lots of resources; it wasn't a simple Science lesson where you could choose a worksheet ... (Expert, focus group)

and through reinforcement, i.e. by repeating activities, by doing in the FL what has already been done in the normal school language rather than teaching completely new content:

I try to repeat the words several times during the lesson [...]. I plan several activities with the same aim. To reinforce the objectives ... I work from the class teacher's plans and I pick the easiest aims to be reinforced. (Expert, mother tongue teacher of foreign language, focus group)

The FLMI situation heightens the teacher's awareness of the potential language (and learning) problems in content lessons more than when the content is taught through the normal school language. The CLIL teacher resorts, as a consequence, to very careful planning of objectives and procedures to map out a secure route to compensate for the difficulties that the introduction of a foreign language medium of instruction brings about. In the EUCLID project for example, some novices even scripted their lessons from beginning to end as a way of identifying a priori possible areas of difficulty, others 'scripted' the language that the pupils would be required to use in their activities, and others chose to write down useful words and expressions in their lesson plans. Whatever the planning strategies adopted it is clear that the CLIL concept has served to highlight an aspect which is central to content learning and which tends to be underestimated – that of language:

I think in the CLIL lesson you look closely at the language because it's not your language you're teaching in whereas if you were teaching in your language you wouldn't identify the language so carefully [...] looking at the exact wording you're going to use is actually better for the children because it's simpler and clearer. Sometimes when you're trying to explain things in your own language you use too many words. (Advisory teacher, focus group)

## References

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