The Language Competence of the CLIL Teacher

Luisanna Paggiaro
lend - lingua e nuova didattica (Italy)

Abstract

The language qualifications of the CLIL teacher are fundamental for the CLIL professional profile, but, unlike methodological training, they have not been much focused on so far in Italy, as they have been mainly considered as the result of personal acquisition or of individual experiences and backgrounds (mother tongues, teaching abroad, courses or certifications).
Since 2010 there have been numerous decrees issued by the Italian Ministry of Education with the aim of organising the various steps of CLIL training – both methodological and linguistic. As concerns the latter I would like to present in this paper my experience of teaching English as a second language in two courses, organized by CAFRE - University of Pisa in collaboration with two secondary schools, for in-service subject teachers who had applied to become CLIL teachers, and needed to get the certification of B2 (Language course B1+, Liceo "Machiavelli", Firenze, September 2014 - January 2015: 90 h in class + 40 h. online; Language course B2+, Liceo "Niccolò Copernico", Prato, January - April 2015: 30 h in class + 13 h online).

Narration

Before planning the syllabus of the two courses in detail and taking decisions about materials, resources, timetables, tests, etc., I reflected upon the results of the teachers' entry tests and language needs, and I wondered about these questions:

- What language skills (*BICS, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills* according to Cummins) should have been mostly developed?
- What *languages for study* (as Serragiotto calls "the competence of the subject microlanguage" and also the "study skills" in a foreign language) had to be identified?
- What linguistic theory was it necessary to transmit to adult learners in order to make them live the language in a dynamic way and perceive its social uses and communicative functions?

Beside these questions I also reflected on the "typology" of the learner: in service teachers in Italian Licei and Technical Schools, aged from 40 to 60, adults who had had previous language and cultural experiences and had their own approach to the study of a foreign language and their personal reaction to this "new" form of teacher training.

After taking these things into consideration, I made up my mind, sharing ideas with a team of colleagues holding different language courses in various towns in Tuscany, and I chose *narration* as the thread running through the syllabus, *narration* as free expression of oneself, as self-awareness of one's own knowledge and language competences, as motivation to personal empowerment and also as reflection on one's own professional and social identity. *Narration* fascinates because of personal stories, the richness of meanings and hints that emerge from them, and because of the mixture of formats, events, characters and relationships. In the light of this approach I have considered the learner as a *narrator* and a *thinker* who expresses his/her own wishes, values and aims in relation to the training project in which s/he is involved, and to the new professional profile s/he is creating. *Narration* has also turned out to be a valid methodological case that has given space and time unity to the whole course and has inserted personal stories into collective history.

The syllabus

The objectives of the two courses have induced me – and my colleagues - to adopt a coursebook in order to guarantee the learners a structured path marked by the functions, grammar and vocabulary necessary to reach the stated linguistic levels, but in reality the handbook has become a sort of backbone, around which activities and games more focused on topics have prevailed as well as the online work. In these two areas – creative activities and online work - forms of narration (audio, video, images, texts, maps) have been introduced and exploited with a good response from the learners.

The online work

The online work has included a wide typology of activities: beside controlled grammar and vocabulary exercises – necessary at some stages of practice – there have been audio and video activities selected from various websites, writing assignments and mind maps useful for oral production.

The objectives of the online work have been as follows:

- To provide further practice of the language in relation to and after classwork;
- To engage learners in listening and pronunciation activities;
- To supply guidelines for writing texts (informal and formal);
- To favour reflection on specific aspects of language and grammar;
- To foster forms of self-evaluation.

The learners' reaction to this type of work has been positive, even though in some cases the teachers have perceived the deadlines as urgent and would have liked to have more time for their autonomous learning.

Metacognitive attitudes

As the course was attended by motivated teachers, conscious of their needs and willing to improve their language competences, I decided to give the course a strong metacognitive connotation which implied the observation of and the reflection upon one's own learning style in order to focus on the following attitudes:

- Expectations, fears and needs in relation to personal engagement and to the cooperation with colleagues (specific activities carried out in the first and second lesson with open discussion of the results);
- Monitoring one's own work and the competences partially or completely achieved (mid-course);
- Reflection and exchange of impressions and ideas (end-of-course).

This has allowed teachers to live this training experience both feeling to belong to a group involved in a process of professional development and becoming autonomous and reflective in their teaching practice.

A content-based approach

If *narration* has been the *fil rouge* of the course the other strong element has been the *content*, that is the various themes that have been dealt with: from the most traditional ones - usually included in course-books (music, food, means of transport, films, etc.) - to others more challenging and suitable to adults (gender differences, communication, science and technology, political language, Globish-global English and the social/regional varieties of the language). Such topics have been discussed starting from personal pre-knowledge in order to exchange opinions, develop critical thinking, adopt problem solving and propose questions and interpretations, not solutions.
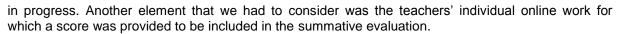
The last element I have taken into account is the notion of *register*, as indicated by Halliday and Hasan (1989) in the three variables of "field", "tenor" and "mode". In the "field" I have referred to the type of activity the learners took part in, in the "tenor" their roles and in the "mode" what type of language had to be used. For example, if the activity was a debate (two teams in a for-and-against argument), I suggested the roles to play in that context, set up adequate scaffolding, observed the development of different ideas and attitudes, and then introduced forms of reflection on the oral performance (grammar, vocabulary, register, accent, intonation, para and extra-linguistic signs).

Both the concern about the content and the immersion into the living language were meant on the one hand to introduce CLIL as integration of language and content, and on the other to prepare teachers to realize this new methodological approach for their present learning and, in a future perspective, for their teaching.

Testing and assessment

Our worry (mine and my colleagues') about testing mainly concerned the skills which had to be included and the validity and reliability of the tests. We decided to choose activities regarding various areas and skills (grammar, listening, speaking/interacting, reading and writing) and to allocate a suitable time to each of them and a score. We also created speaking and writing marking grids in order to assess performances and texts according to appropriate criteria. In our effort to identify CEFR descriptors at the level B2 we realized that CEFR scales refer to general language competences and that we needed to adapt and integrate them keeping in mind the typology of learners and their learning

in progress. Another element that we had to consider was the teachers' individual online work for which a score was provided to be included in the summative evaluation.

Feedback and self-evaluation

At the end of the two courses teachers were asked to provide their feedback through an online questionnaire concerning the following features of the course: contents, length, timetable, objectives, methodology, organization and quality. I have also collected teachers' response in a more personal and free way through various tasks (observation and reflection activities) and a few final written notes regarding these three areas:

- Motivation: what has convinced teachers to enroll in the course and attend it;
- Impact and results: what has changed in their approach to the language and in their language competences;
- Future perspectives: what teachers are expecting to do in the near future for their CLIL career.

Here are some of the most meaningful comments.
Motivation

- *I love languages and I love teaching: CLIL has mixed them wonderfully well!*
- *I had some doubt at the beginning about the usefulness of teaching my subject in English, but now I have realized how it is worth doing it.*
- *I wanted to retrain as a teacher.*
- *I feel the desire to get to know new methodologies and acquire new teaching tools.*
- *I think it is fundamental for me and for my students to improve English and develop communicative skills.*

Impact and results

- *I have appreciated the possibility of actively interacting in the class and as a consequence of it I have greatly improved my listening and speaking skills.*
- *The first difficulty has been the one of speaking in front of all the colleagues without getting ashamed of the mistakes we usually make! But the group work has helped me overcome this "psychological barrier".*
- *During the course interesting hints for autonomous research and study have emerged which each of us has been able to exploit according to personal needs and likes.*
- *I have become more aware of how language phenomena are strictly interrelated and how the study of English may provide further insights into the study of Italian and Latin.*
- *The major problem has been memorization, not so good in adults!*
- *It has been a pleasure to sit at a desk as a student and try to overcome my laziness.*
- *It has been tiring to attend a course with numerous assignments and hard work while teaching in your classes, but I am satisfied with the results I have achieved.*

Future perspectives

- *I am ready to continue my professional development attending one of the next courses on CLIL methodology.*
- *Now I would like to have an experience of training abroad hoping to find new stimulus for my language competence and teaching.*
- *I will certainly keep on studying English in order to be better prepared to teach CLIL.*
- *I am planning to implement a CLIL unit or a module in my classes.*
- *I am quite disappointed as I have not been included in the list of teachers entitled to attend the CLIL methodological course next autumn… I hope my turn will come soon!*

It is evident that teachers have realized the course has been a step in their professional development and that their setting off along the CLIL path implies a great change and a long run!

References

[1] Anfossi R., Paolini A., Sciarretta F., Vidotto P. (2008) *Strumenti narrativi per il successo formativo. Percorsi e schede per gli insegnanti, i formatori e i consulenti di orientamento*, Edizioni Erickson.
[2] Batini F., Zaccaria R., *Per un orientamento narrativo.*
http://www.pratika.net/portal/images/stories/risorse/orientamento/perunon/ON_01.pdf
[3] Cummins J., BICS and CALP.
http://iteachilearn.org/cummins/bicscalp.html; http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummin.htm

[4] Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan R. (1989) *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social Semiotic Perspective*, Oxford: OUP.

[5] Llinares A., Morton T. and Whittaker R. (2012) *The Roles of Language in CLIL*, CUP.

[6] Richards J.C., Lockhart C. (1996) *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classroom, CUP.*

[7] Serragiotto G. (2014) *Dalle microlingue al CLIL*, UTET.

[8] Wallace W.J. (1998) *Action Research for Language Teachers*, CUP.