The Impact of ICT on CLIL History:
New Sources, New Languages, New Tasks

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Abstract

One major issue with the CLIL methodology concerns the selection of authentic materials to introduce contents of non-linguistic subjects in the target language. As it is often hard for teachers to find sources in the traditional publishing market, the Internet provides a large number of materials to be adapted to the learners' needs. The study of History, in particular, involves the analysis of primary and secondary sources so as to promote the learners' autonomy, critical approach to information, and their metacognitive skills. Bearing in mind that culture plays a pivotal role in the CLIL approach, analysing authentic sources proves to be crucial in understanding the cultural context and its changes over time as well as the diachronic variation of the language.

The aim of the present study is twofold. On one hand, it sets out to illustrate the role of ICT in the formation of new linguistic codes and text genres in the English language that will be the part of the world historiographical heritage in the future. On the other hand, the work focuses on how to employ traditional sources in teaching History by adapting them to the means and languages preferred by digital natives.

By analysing and comparing authentic sources – dealing with similar contents but produced in different historical periods and spread through different channels – the major changes occurred in the language of politics and diplomacy were examined.

The analysis showed that the use of ICT in politics and diplomacy over the last decades – i.e. tomorrow's history – has resulted in significant differences between old and new sources, which reveal dramatic changes in the statesmen's ways of communicating, mirrored by the channels and language that they select. Today's leaders tweet their opinions and political, religious or ideological groups meet and exchange their opinions online rather than in real places as in the past. Such virtual communities are ideal places for political propaganda, which, despite the increasing persuasion power of images and videos, is still significantly conveyed through language, particularly through English. However, the channel whereby information is spread in the era of Web 2.0 has generated new forms along the diamesic dimension of linguistic variation, which are characterised by new morpho-syntactic rules and new lexical tools. Twitter, for example, prescribes that each text must not exceed the length of 140 characters, introduces the hashtag (#) as a label to mark keywords or topics and as a new punctuation mark that substitutes the traditional full stop. These conventions also affect the lexical choices of web writers, who coin neologisms, catchy formulas, and abbreviations such as the new word NObama to refer to anything contrary to Barack Obama. The results of such analysis are the basis for designing learning tasks involving the new linguistic features fostered by the social media, so as to raise the motivation of today's students.

1. History: a suitable CLIL subject to be learnt through ICT

Ever since CLIL became a mandatory feature of upper secondary education in Italy, an increasing number of teachers have been teaching History through a foreign language, most frequently through English [1]. Such choice appears to be advantageous for EFL students considering that learning History content in the target language helps them attain a higher level of language proficiency. Language plays a significant role in acquiring this non-linguistic subject that includes written and oral sources, which allows students to enhance their performance in all four language skills as they are presented with authentic texts.

It is still difficult for CLIL teachers to find suitable historical materials in the target language. Using subject-specific course books in a foreign language means having students learn the content-based subject in a second language, rather than through an additional language as required by the dual-focused educational approach: "Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become the umbrella term describing both learning another (content) subject such as Physics or Geography through the medium of a foreign language and learning a foreign language by studying a content-based subject" [2]. A CLIL course book should thus include materials for learning both the content and the target language.

Although nowadays the publishing industry is creating specific resources for each subject with integrated language support, teachers must be able to adapt them to the aims and objectives of their courses. These books are unlikely to provide a complete non-linguistic subject curriculum and activities for different language levels. In order to fill these gaps, teachers often use search engines to find materials suitable for use in their classes [3]. Internet can be particularly helpful to CLIL teachers in planning History lessons for students learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). A large number of English-language websites and online repositories indeed include primary and secondary historical sources, ranging from famous statesmen's speeches in audio and their transcripts, to maps and pictures, as well as other resources like timelines, mind-maps, reading and listening comprehension activities, and games.

2. The Language of historical sources in the past and the present

Until the 1990s historical facts and events were studied in schools almost exclusively through *secondary sources*, i.e. articles and books written later by historians who interpreted and explained the *primary sources*, which encompassed the authentic, raw material that had come into existence within the period being investigated. The need to raise students' motivation, however, led subsequently to the introduction of meaningful original traces from the past for students to analyse them directly, so as to have them construct their own interpretations of history.

The importance of primary sources has been highlighted by both history experts and scholars [4]. Moreover, as Lee *et al.* found out, these sources are regarded by teachers as being crucial in "(a) creating a context for developing historical thinking skills; (b) providing a sense of the conditions of the period under study, and (c) understanding the essential facts, concepts, and generalizations that underlie historical knowledge"[5]. In the perspective of CLIL History, primary sources prove to be functional to both the main aims of the approach. From a content-based viewpoint, they are vital for historical inquiry as they provide authentic evidence not only about major events but also about the thinking and the way of living in the period under investigation, i.e. the culture, bearing in mind that culture is a crucial component in CLIL [6]. As far as the target language is concerned, the analysis of primary sources can reveal changes in linguistic features across ages – i.e. the diachronic *variation* of the language –, especially the changes occurred in the lexis of politics, economics and society. Within the scope of the English language, for instance, a new meaning has been added to the word *trench* – originally a long, narrow ditch dug by troops for defense – to designate the waterproof coat worn by the soldiers in the WWII trenches. The term *trench* has subsequently entered several languages as a loan word from English to refer to a fashionable raincoat.

Primary historical sources have traditionally comprised visual relics such as objects and pictures, as well as textual ones including parliamentary papers, dispatches, personal letters and diaries, statistics, and leaders' official messages. In the last few decades, however, as a result of the introduction of ICT, new types of primary sources have been added to or have even substituted traditional primary sources, e.g. diaries have been replaced by blogs, postcards by SMS, letters by emails. Let us also consider the texts produced by political or religious leaders to communicate their opinions and messages to people: while Churchill gave passionate, inspiring radio speeches to the British people to keep them united against the enemy during WWII, today's leaders increasingly express their ideas in short, concise *tweets*. In the past propaganda was spread through leaflets, posters, and public speeches, using even the refined, allusive, metaphorical, language of poetry – like Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden*.; nowadays persuasive messages circulate in a very direct language through posts, comments, and videos published on online discussion forums and social networks, which may be used in the future as an authentic historical primary source.

It is worth noting that these ICT-generated types of texts have specific features, of which students should be made aware. As early as 1984, linguist Naomi Baron predicted that "norms characteristic of computer mediated communication may change generally accepted standards for spoken or traditionally written languages" [7]. The growing use of ICTs has indeed created a new way of understanding the *diamesic* dimension of language variation which goes beyond the clear-cut distinction between written and spoken language. Social networking websites usually lay down detailed rules for their users that also affect the choices of language. *Twitter*, particularly, limits tweet length to 140 characters so that users tend to adopt abbreviations, clippings, contractions, blends, symbols and to omit spaces between words, as shown in the following reply to a tweet from Obama on the withdrawal of US Forces from Iraq: "Wanting to keep us safe! How about this: LETTING GO TERRORISTS FROM GITMO AND DEMS/REP EXPLAINED TO NOBAMA THAT THEY'LL". From a lexical perspective, the post contains a number of different abbreviations such as *DEMS*, standing for 'democrats', and *REP*, which may be the clipping of *representative* or *Republican*. Furthermore, the word *GITMO* is both the informal name for the detention facility at Guantánamo and the pronunciation

of its abbreviation *GTMO* [8]. The neologism *NOBAMA* is an example of portmanteau word, resulting from the combination of *No+Obama* and referring to anything or anyone contrary to the US President [9]. As to orthography, the use of all capitals is a way of showing deep disapproval or anger, while the symbol forward slash (/) is used between alternatives (e.g. *and/or*). These linguistic phenomena, together with an inappropriate use of grammar – e.g. *THEY'LL*, where the auxiliary *WILL* should be written in full form as it is not followed by a lexical verb – make it difficult for non-native speakers to understand the semantic content of this post.

3. ICT as a source of learning

A wide range of previous studies have proved that the use of ICT in the learning/teaching process can have several positive effects on students' motivation, which is specially needed in CLIL classes due to its dual-focused aims. Such benefits are identified by Cox as "greater interest and involvement in learning, greater self-esteem, determination to achieve specific tasks, spending more time on the learning task, trying to do better that [*sic*] one's peers, and achieving more control over one's own learning" [10].

Web-based learning tasks may make History – which students often associated with the old and static – an interesting, dynamic subject matter. These activities also involve the use of language for real communicative purposes and promote intercultural awareness by extracting information from several sources produced in different countries. (CLIL) History teachers can engage "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" [11] in activities requiring them to "translate" traditional sources into their own languages, using the ICT tools with which they are extremely familiar. Here follows a sample of activities involving the use of social media [12].

- Task A: *Using discussion forums instead of class debates*. After reading a secondary source on the reasons for and against Italy's entry into WWI, students are asked to work in groups of 5 and create a discussion board on *Facebook* about interventionists and neutralists. Then each student has to summarize the most significant comments added to the forum by participants in a given number of lines. This task involves ICT skills, language skills, and can be used to test the students' understanding of the topic.
- Task B: *Finding out about the origins of specific historical terms and their usage in everyday language*. "Before you read the text on extreme nationalism, search the Internet where the words *chauvinism* and *jingoism* come from and the meaning of *male chauvinism* in common parlance". This is an example of how the study of historical sources through the CLIL methodology allows students to reflect on linguistic changes.
- Task C: *Identifying key concepts in primary sources and summarizing them into Twitter posts.* "Listen twice to Churchill's speech *This Was Their Finest Hour* (18/06/1940) and take notes. Then summarizes the key concepts into *Twitter* posts. How many hashtags would you use? Try to use the language today's politicians would select". This task enhances comprehension and makes written production more enjoyable.
- Task D: *Connecting the past to the present.* "Search for at least three open *Facebook* groups and read more about their ideas and values. Compare and contrast them with Mussolini's objectives and aims that you have read in *The Manifesto of Fasci di Combattimento*. Then discuss the findings of your search with your classmates". By comparing the ideas shared on social media, learners can link past to present events, which makes studying History more relevant to today's life and, consequently, more motivating for students.
- Task E. *Understanding key concepts and identifying key words (to create Twitter hashtags).*

  "A. Read carefully the following *Twitter* posts. Then listen twice to the audio file on the "Roaring Twenties" and match each Twitter user below with the corresponding tweet".

@HiramWesleyEvans, a leader of Ku Klux Klan **@Florrie**, a flapper **@AlCapone**, a gangster

  1. @_____

"I have to pay income tax but I can't deduct the bribes I've paid to politicians, judge and policemen"

2. @ _____

"How I hate those who are dedicated to producing conformity!"

3. @_____

"America must be a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant country!"

KEY: 1. AlCapone; 2. Florrie; 3. HiramWesleyEvans

"B. Now match the hashtags (a-c) from the box to the corresponding posts (1-3)"

a.   #trendy   b. # defendtheirownrace   c. #Scarface

KEY: a-2; b-3; c-1

Conclusion

CLIL History teachers, digital immigrants, need to adapt traditional teaching strategies and techniques to the languages of the digital generation students so as to make the learning process more interesting and, therefore, successful. The use of ICT allows students to retrieve information relevant to the topic from a wide range of sources to identify and describe historical as well as linguistic relationships, trends and changes. Social media, in particular, present students with authentic language and diverse text types within non-artificial linguistic contexts. Through these tools, moreover, students are spurred to focus on keywords and key concepts, and can discuss/debate on historical facts and events with other peers/users.

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