

# “Teachers Or Learners?”: Swapping Roles in CLIL Classes to Improve Speaking Skills and Motivation. A Vertical Transversal Project

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## Abstract

*Recent language curriculum reforms in the Italian education policy have focused on CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology with great emphasis on the active collaboration between language and content teachers to foster students' communication and transversal competencies. However, in many schools, the shortage of qualified subject-area teachers with CLIL prerequisites has frequently impeded the innovation required by the Ministry, thus calling for more training on content and language goals. Convinced of the advantages of CLIL programming and supported by school administrators versed in such methodology, it was agreed that a multi-faceted approach was needed which used all the resources and competencies we had at our disposal.*

*This study aims at presenting a two years' vertical project involving students from different school grades engaged in interdisciplinary CLIL activities as protagonists of their learning. Senior students of a scientific high school in the provinces of Lodi and Milan became content-instructors of junior mentees who, in turn, taught last-year students from nearby middle schools after some disciplinary topics (Art, History, Science, Technology, Social Studies) had been vertically and mutually agreed with the students who played the role of novice educators. Constant monitoring and supervision were assured in the different phases of the project by both language and content teachers who cooperated as facilitators and, in a certain sense, as learners, too.*

*By swapping roles our objectives were both linguistic and pedagogical since we wanted to investigate how students' attitudes towards English learning and communication could improve in this new and reversed CLIL environment. To achieve our aims both quantitative analyses and questionnaires were adopted which all valued the vertical implementation as a powerful way of promoting motivation and interaction. Our results also proved that being lectured by peers was beneficial to boost students' speaking skills at all levels and to learn contents more effectively.*

**Keywords:** CLIL, Communication, Speaking, Peer Teaching; Motivation

## 1. CLIL in Italy

Following the 2010 national language reform revising the high school educational policy with the aim of better equipping learners for the global age and aligning Italy with other European teaching programs, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning ) has emerged as an innovative methodology catering to modern generations' cognitive and linguistic needs. Teaching a non-language subject (NS) through the medium of a second or foreign language (L2), CLIL has been seen not only as a means of improving knowledge and competence in foreign language learning and teaching but also as a way of renewing interest and motivation among students and instructors alike (Coyle, Holmes and King, 2009), since language and content have a joint and mutually beneficial role in the approach (Marsh, 2002). Thus, a perfect integration among the teaching staff (NS and L2) can really turn standard lectures into original CLIL classes successfully combining elements of content, communication, cognition and culture, together with a wide range of discourse skills.

## 2. Orientating towards CLIL

It is undeniable that teaming up with colleagues (NS and L2) can maximize the impact of CLIL on learning (Mehisto, Marsh, Frigols, 2008). However, faced with the request of the Ministry of Education (D.D. n.6, 16 April 2012) (MIUR, 2012), which recommended carrying out the 50% of the final year's curricular lessons following the CLIL methodology and targeting the C1 language level of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), a large number of educators in our Lyceum felt linguistically and pedagogically unprepared. The critical points mainly concerned how the various

disciplines were to be taught through the second language and who was specifically qualified for that purpose.

Convinced of the advantages of CLIL programming and supported by school administrators versed in CLIL methodology it was agreed to take any action deemed necessary to address the shortage of trained teachers. It was clear from the outset that a multifaceted approach was needed which used all the resources and competencies we had at our disposal, other than our enthusiasm largely necessary to compensate for the greater workload and the limited budgets.

### 3. The “Teachers or Learners?” project

#### 3.1 Background and participants

Born from the necessity of overcoming the lack of CLIL qualified teachers in a scientific high school in Lodi (bordering on Milan), the project has transformed a need into virtue, taking advantage of what is the very essence of CLIL methodology: integration. With the “Teachers or Learners?” project integration refers both to NS teacher-L2 teacher and teacher-student cooperation, to student-student interaction and to learners’ direct engagement with teaching and learning materials. Basically, the “Teachers or Learners?” project is a two years’ vertical and transversal project (2015-2017) in which cross-curricular themes have been extended and taught to middle school pupils by eleven and twelve grade students. As such, it is a vertical project because it engages students from different school grades as protagonist of their learning (peer education); it is transversal because the shared CLIL topics were part of the schools’ respective ministerial programmes, and it is also interactive because all the participants (teachers and students) exchanged information by means of web tools and social media.

#### 3.2 Aims and research questions

The main aim of the “Teachers or Learners?” project was to develop and pilot a framework for teaching and learning transversal competencies through the medium of a second language where students could practice and improve their skills making use of cooperative strategies and digital tools. Other formative and educational goals were: (1) to diversify methods and approaches of classroom practice; (2) to provide opportunities to study contents from different perspectives; (3) to develop thinking processes; (4) to employ web tools efficiently; (5) to foster different learning styles.

The project also aimed at answering the following research questions:

- How can the Ministerial CLIL requirements (in content and second language education) be successfully satisfied with shortage of qualified staff?
- Will CLIL learners achieve better language proficiency if lectured by peers?
- Will CLIL students’ content knowledge and motivation be affected by this reversed and innovative approach?

#### 3.3 Project procedures

**Phase 1:** In October 2015 a general survey carried out by our Territorial Education Board decreed the shortage of CLIL teachers in the province suitable for the “CLIL Teacher Profile” (Miur, 2012) whose prerequisites interwove high language and subject competencies with CLIL teaching expertise

**Phase 2:** CLIL-minded teachers from our school decided to network with colleagues from six middle schools of Lodi and Milan provinces to overcome the CLIL obstacle

**Phase 3:** Topics, goals, methodologies, project phases, activities and assessment criteria were first agreed and next shared with students

**Phase 4:** The “Teachers or Learners?” project was designed involving senior students of our scientific high school who became content-instructors of junior mentees (eleven-twelve grade students) from the same school, who, in turn, coached last-year pupils (eight grade) from six nearby middle schools on the following CLIL cross-curricular topics: (Fig.1):



School year	CLIL cross-curricular and transversal topics
2015-16	Article writing and journalism Evolution Gothic art and stained glasses (Canterbury Cathedral) The Tudors Art and painting
2016-17	Renewable resources Recycling Nelson Mandela and apartheid Cyberbullying

**Fig. 1** Table with the CLIL cross-curricular topics shared by high and middle school students

**Phase 5:** For a semester both senior and junior high school students were trained and coached on CLIL thematic areas and CLIL teaching foundations by content and language teachers. This “pre-service” session took the form of weekly workshops aimed to master subject specific vocabulary and classroom discourse and to work out activities and worksheets enhancing prospective learners’ interaction. The novice teachers were lectured in English on such strategies as presenting new information, demonstrating, outlining, using visuals, rephrasing, scaffolding, linking new information to previous knowledge, making inputs comprehensible and context-embedded. Attention was paid to possible obstacles based partly on the limited background knowledge of the target community and partly on L1 and L2 interference (the use of L1 was to be the last resort). Finally, stress was also put on the need to use a variety of verbal and non-verbal means to illustrate meanings, such as: repetitions, gestures, body language, analogies and exemplifications (better if carried out with the use of visual and multimedia aids).

**Phase 6:** The final presentation practice consisted of micro-teaching episodes (from 10 to 20 minutes) with immediate feedback from NS and L2 teachers. They varied from simple game-like activities suited for the beginning of the class (warming-up) to more complex team teaching where two or three student-teachers performed the presentation and practice stage of the CLIL lesson.

**Phase 7:** In May (2016 and 2017), groups of novice teachers engaged their younger learners in CLIL topics (according to the choices made by each middle school from a list of mutually agreed themes), trying to exhibit such CLIL teaching behaviours as: giving instructions clearly, describing tasks accurately, maintaining participants’ motivation alive and keeping collaboration constructive and respectful.

**Phase 8:** Final assessment. Evaluation criteria for both CLIL content and language had been established before modules were presented. Assessment activities included individual or group quizzes and questionnaires, interactive games, hands-on tasks, visual representations (such as pictures, pictographs, maps, diagrams) and role-plays. Each presentation was attended and supervised by NS and L2 teachers who monitored students’ involvement and participation by means of observation sheets. Most activities had immediate feedback.

**Phase 9:** Results were exchanged and analyzed.

**Phase 10:** The CLIL modules designed by the teachers-students were uploaded on the school platform and made available to fellow teachers and learners. A “CLIL day” was also organized as a final and experience-sharing moment involving all participants.

## 4. Results

Regarding our research questions, the results from questionnaires and the feedback from teachers and learners proved that both content and language competencies were favourably affected by our reversed CLIL settings. These data come in line with previous research which has shown that there are gains, both cognitive and linguistic, when learners are instructed in CLIL contexts (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Additionally, peer teaching resulted in better understanding of curricular concepts thus demonstrating that rather than being a hindrance, it actually has a strong potential for the learning of subject-specific concepts. Similarly, class involvement and motivation were positively influenced by this innovative peer-instruction since all students alike benefited from being CLIL lectured by fellow educators, not only the brightest or the most talented ones. Finally, our research showed that also our novice educators did well: they learnt contents more deeply and gained several socio-cultural skills



that will enrich their professional and academic lives (according to the National “Work-based learning programme”)

## 5. Conclusions

Supported by a considerable body of educational research, CLIL enthusiasts never seem to get tired of telling about the benefits of CLIL. However, it is also wise to have some sense of the problems that CLIL initiatives may present. This paper describes how some of these challenges have been faced thanks to the creation of an enriching learning environment where students were empowered to co-construct their understanding and language proficiency actively working with their peers. This is the essence of CLIL. It has been a lot of hard work, but all the participants in the CLIL team feel it has been professionally rewarding. As such, the multidisciplinary team that was created has become a model for other schools in the province and the project has been renewed and replicated.

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