



# Lessons Learnt from Remote CLIL and Online Interaction during COVID-19 Emergency

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## Abstract

*Starting from the remote teaching and learning experience that all Italian teachers had during the COVID-19 emergency period, this paper will focus on the main lessons learnt from remote CLIL activities planned and implemented by teachers within an online post-graduate CLIL course promoted by Università Telematica degli Studi IUL. A group of teachers described their remote CLIL activities during a “TeachMeet” webinar, attended by more than 200 participants, sharing five slides in five minutes, according to a presentation format adapted from the well-known Japanese format called “PechaKucha”. Some examples will be mentioned in this paper, referring to the different webtools used in order to plan and implement effective CLIL teaching and learning activities remotely, such as sharing boards, interactive synchronous webtools, online tools for debating, tools for cooperative writing etc. The activities described by the teachers showed the potential of learning technologies to enhance language learning and CLIL as an added value to face-to-face lessons and even more, during the remote teaching period. The common dimension of all the remote CLIL activities shown and described during the “TeachMeet” webinar is the focus on online interaction, the only way of communication among teachers and students and among peers during lockdown. Online interaction is one of the new descriptors introduced by the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of reference (CEFR CV) published by the Council of Europe in the final version in 2020. Starting from the description of the scales on online interaction descriptors provided by the Companion Volume, the paper will try to show how remote CLIL teaching and learning experiences during the COVID-19 emergency fostered the students’ online interaction in the foreign language, enhancing communicative skills through multimodality.*

**Keywords:** CLIL, remote teaching and learning, webtools, online interaction.

## 1. Introduction

During lockdown due to COVID-19, Italian teachers, as well as the majority of teachers all over the world, were forced to teach online and the Internet was the only way to reach their students. This was a very demanding and challenging situation in unprecedented times and a lot of teachers were not prepared to teach remotely as they needed specific training. That is why INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research in Italy) and Università Telematica degli Studi IUL, the online university co-funded by INDIRE, organized a wide range of webinars and other initiatives, aimed at fostering the creation of a Community of Practice, where expert teachers could share their case examples and good practices with their peers, aiming at a mutual personal and professional enrichment and support.

That was the case of the “CLIL TeachMeet”, an online event organized within a postgraduate course on CLIL promoted by Università Telematica degli Studi IUL. The course was addressed to teachers from primary and secondary school, passionate about CLIL and willing to learn more about this methodology and to plan and experiment CLIL activities with their students, also using technologies for remote teaching and learning.

## 2. Background

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has been compulsory in Italy since 2010 [1] [2], and it is also recommended and encouraged at primary and lower secondary school.

Even if the majority of Italian schools usually opt for English as the language for CLIL, also other foreign languages can be taught, according to the specific school specialization. This is in line with the European language policy, summarized in the Council Recommendation for a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages [3], where CLIL in Italy is highlighted as a case example for Europe, due to the democratic and inclusive approach adopted, which entails delivering CLIL in all fifth classes of upper secondary schools, regardless of the level of competences of the



students in the foreign language. The European Commission report [4] published in September 2020, mentioned the situation of CLIL in Italy as follows: “Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), or the teaching of a subject in a foreign language, is an essential part of the language, strategy in Italy” (p. 9). The afore-mentioned report stated that “EU Member States are more widely promoting and supporting teachers to adopt innovative language pedagogies in their classrooms. In addition to CLIL, online language learning tools are also effective as they can provide non-judgmental and student-centred learning experiences” (p. 10).

The combination of CLIL and learning technologies is considered effective in the literature [5], as it can enhance students’ receptive and productive skills and can make them the real protagonists of their learning pathways. Learning technologies can also foster mediation and interaction as students can use international platforms, webtools, social networks to communicate with peers in Italy or in other parts of the world. Online interaction is one of the new descriptors introduced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – Companion Volume (CEFRV), published by the Council of Europe in April 2020. “Online interaction” and “Goal-Oriented Transactions” are the two descriptors of the CEFRV which are fundamental in remote teaching and learning.

### 3. Online interaction

The CEFRV (p. 84) defines online discussion as a “multimodal phenomenon, with an emphasis on how interlocutors communicate online to handle both serious issues and social exchanges in an open-ended way. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following:

- instances of simultaneous (real-time) and consecutive interaction, the latter allowing time to prepare a draft and/or consult aids;
- participation in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors;
- composing posts and contributions for others to respond to;
- comments (for example, evaluative) on the posts, comments and contributions of others; f reactions to embedded media;
- the ability to include symbols, images and other codes to make the message convey tone, stress and prosody, but also the affective/emotional side, irony, etc.”

Before COVID-19 emergency, INDIRE, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and with Brian North and Enrica Piccardo, among the experts of the Council of Europe co-authoring the CEFRV, carried out a pilot project with a sample of primary, lower and upper secondary schools in Italy. Teachers were guided to plan and experiment CLIL tasks with their students entailing online interaction with peers in the same school or in other Italian or European schools, using English as the language of communication [6].

In the picture below an example of online task is shown [7]: Italian students are interacting online with Finnish students asking and answering questions about different places in their respective countries, using a tool for geolocalization.



Fig. 1. An example of online task [7]

Online interaction in the foreign language was fostered and enhanced during lockdown in order to encourage students to use the language in a meaningful way in authentic contexts through the internet, the social networks and social media, also connecting the formal with the informal dimension of the learning pathway.

As far as online interaction is concerned, in June 2020 a survey was launched at international level, promoted by INDIRE in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education and with Brian North and Enrica Piccardo, aimed at investigating how teachers planned, monitored, implemented and assessed



language learning and CLIL activities based on online interaction during the pandemic. 1160 teachers filled in the online survey, the majority of them were Italian (92,5%). Among the different data collected through the survey, it is interesting to report the teachers' opinion about the students' reactions to online interaction during Covid-19. They thought their students were satisfied (38.6%) and quite satisfied (33.0%): these encouraging figures show that remote teaching and learning were perceived as effective and fruitful anyway, despite the challenges due to the pandemic.

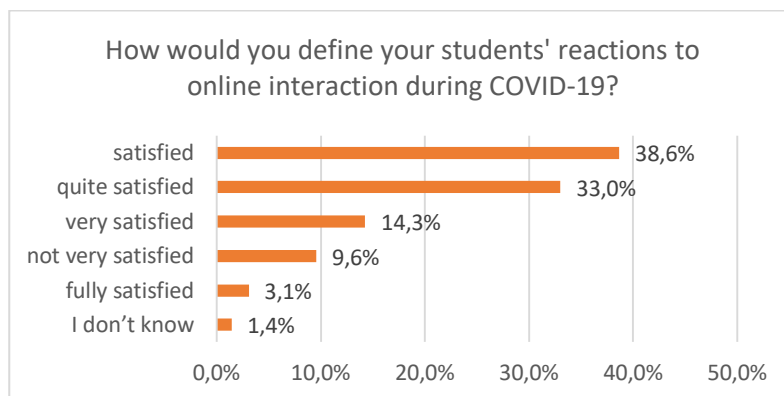


Fig. 2 – Students' reactions to online interaction during the pandemic

#### 4. CLIL “TeachMeet”

A webinar in the format of a “CLIL Teachmeet” was held in June 2020, within an online postgraduate course on CLIL promoted by Università Telematica degli Studi IUL, Italy, and it was attended by more than 200 teachers. Teachers from primary, lower and upper secondary schools were invited to present their remote CLIL teaching experiences, by sharing a five-slide presentation in five minutes, taking inspiration from the well-known Japanese storytelling format, named “PechaKucha” [8].

The presentations were very interesting and allowed teachers to share webtools, activities and techniques for remote teaching with their peers.

An example of webtool, which has become popular during the pandemic is “kialo”, shown in the picture below. A teacher of English, Michele Gabbanelli, described his teaching experience with his students during a debate [9], an attractive and engaging methodology, fostering students' oracy and public speaking skills. The webtool allows the students to post their arguments in favour or against a given claim, that was in this case: “It's become appallingly obvious that our technology has surpassed our humanity”. It is a way to foster written debating skills in a multimedia and multimodal format. Online oral debate sessions on the same topic in synchronous meetings can integrate and complete the learning experience.

Online interaction, as highlighted in the CEFRCV, can be effectively enhanced through online debates both in the written and in the oral mode.

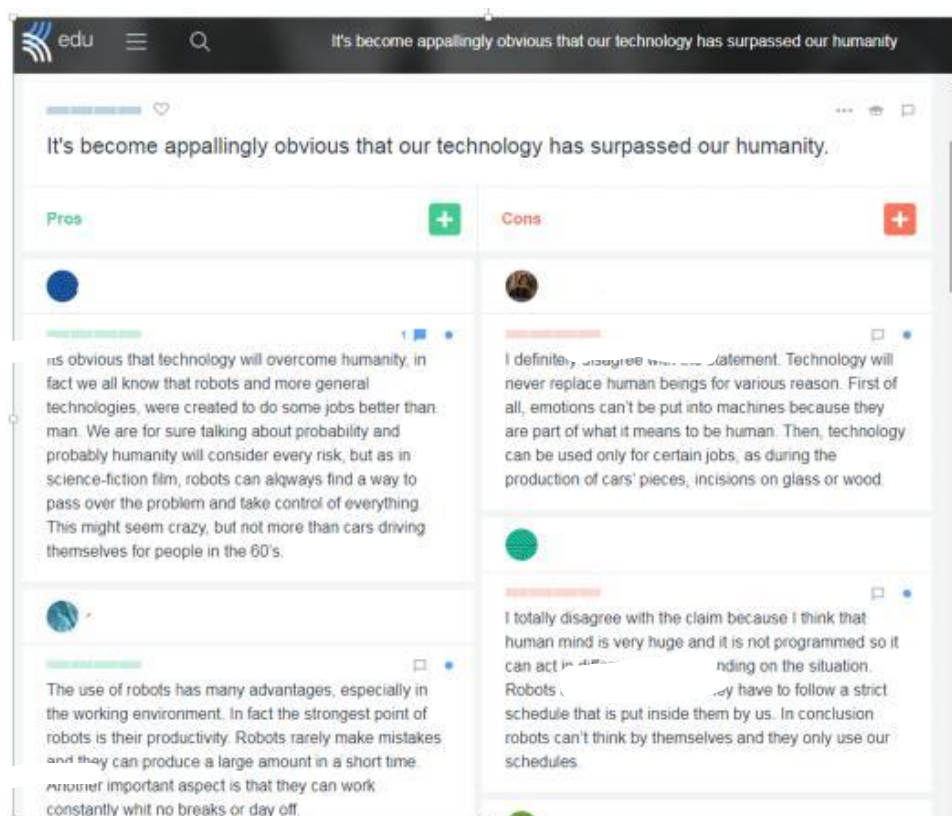


Fig. 3 - An example of webtool for written debates

Another example of presentation was held by another teacher of English, Francesca Ripamonti and was aimed at eliciting reflections on the key role of learning technologies for language learning and CLIL within a Mathematics remote task-based project in English. The planning of the activities, described in the picture below, followed Do Coyle [10] 4Cs model: Content (Mathematics: metric vs imperial), Communication (pandemic subject-specific), Cognition (scaffolding, reasoning etc.), Culture (others' awareness).

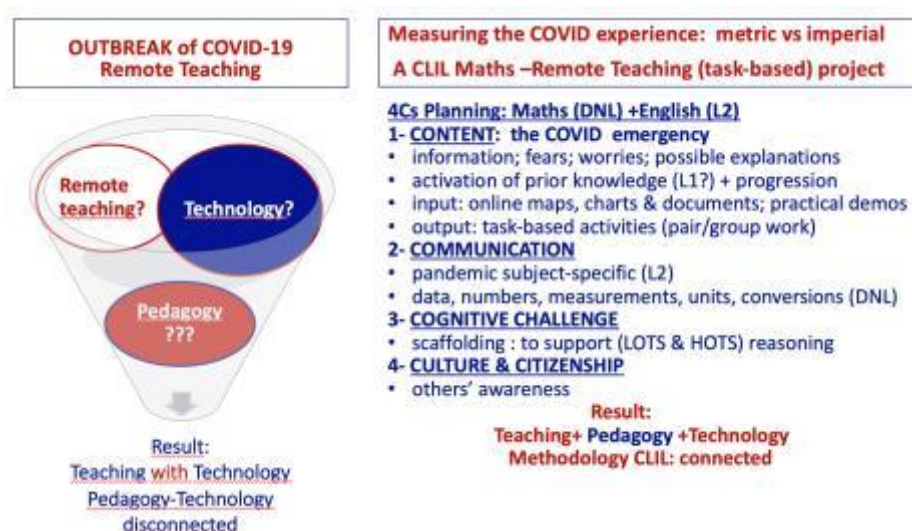


Fig. 4 – An example of remote CLIL pathway in Mathematics



A wide range of other interesting inputs and practical examples were provided during the “CLIL TeachMeet”, which was much appreciated by the participants as a way to share experiences and practices within a Community of Practice, trying to overcome problems and challenges of remote teaching together.

## Conclusions

During the pandemic due to Covid-19, despite all the challenges and difficulties Italian teachers had to face, as well as teachers from all over the world, they did their best to teach CLIL remotely, using a wide range of webtools, platforms and resources. Learning technologies turned out to be fundamental during this period, as already highlighted in the literature. In particular, online interactions among students allowed them to keep in touch with their peers in a virtual mode, as it was not possible face-to-face, and to use the foreign language in authentic and meaningful contexts.

Different online initiatives were organized in Italy by the Ministry of Education, by INDIRE and by a wide range of other stakeholders, such as Università Telematica degli Studi IUL, in order to support teachers and encourage them to share their experiences among a Community of Practice.

Examples of online initiatives held during the pandemic were presented in this paper, to show the teachers’ effort to teach CLIL remotely, with the use of technologies: in particular, some teaching experiences presented during an online “CLIL TeachMeet” were highlighted.

The background of the paper is represented by the European language policy summarized in the Council Recommendation for a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages (2019) and in the European Commission report published in September 2020. The online interaction descriptors introduced by the new CEFRCV have also been mentioned as an important reference for this paper.

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