Integrating the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) with CLIL

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Abstract

CLIL introduces a cognitive dimension which is missing (or not explicitly considered) in the CEFR and adds a new competence: using the language to learn.

Our aim is to build a framework where "cognitive competences" and "linguistic competences" are described in terms of difficulty, ranging from the lowest to the highest level.

We have tried to formulate a first schema, a kind of conceptual framework on the basis of a class observation. At present we can provide examples for the "basic user" levels (A1/A2). We need to go further in order to complete the grid in relation to the other levels, e.g.: independent users (B1/B2), and proficient users (C1/C2).

An initial proposal was submitted as a Lingua 2 project in 2003 (coordinated by Aine Furlong – Ireland and T. Barbero as the representative of the Italian partnership), the project was entitled Framing CLIL.

Keywords: CEFR, cognition, building background, scaffolding, CLIL descriptors

Introduction

In Italy CLIL is not officially included in school syllabi, but many experiments have been carried out in schools at different levels, and in some universities CLIL modules have also been introduced in initial training courses for language teachers.

The first question the future teachers generally ask is: “Communicative approach or CLIL? Are these approaches compatible?”

The model they face, as with almost all language teachers, is the CEFR; the pragmatic, communicative perspective it introduces is well known. It describes the competences necessary for communication, the related skills and different domains. Its focus is on the use of the language in a relational dimension: learning the language in order to communicate with people and to interact with them.

Our proposal is that not only is CLIL not contradictory with communicative approaches inspired by the CEFR but that it also enhances communication.

The communicative competence – BICS, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skill (Cummins, 2000) – involves linguistic knowledge in terms of functions, structures, vocabulary and the use of social and cultural conventions as well.
The competence in a specific field – CALP, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency – still needs language in terms of functions, structures, vocabulary but also specific skills and knowledge in that field. A discipline is a way of knowing, and whatever is known is inseparable from the symbols (mostly words) in which the knowing is codified. What is biology or history other than words? Almost all of what we customarily call “knowledge” is language, which means that the key to understanding a subject is to understand its language (Wellington et al., 2001).

In a communicative approach, whose model of reference is the CEFR, we learn the language to communicate; in CLIL we learn contents and also the language through the contents. This means that CLIL integrates communicative skills, subject skills and knowledge, as well as learning skills.

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**CLIL potentialities**

CLIL potentialities have been summarized (Coyle, 2002) as four essential principles: content, communication, cognition, and culture. Their combination makes CLIL a very powerful tool to learn languages and subjects, proposed by European authorities as one of the best strategies to encourage languages learning. The relationship between all these elements demands a focus on methodology, on how subjects are taught and learnt in a foreign language. In this perspective the development of the cognitive dimension in language learning is the real challenge of CLIL.

Cummins’s quadrant (Cummins, 2000) represents the double dimension of CLIL (Figure 1): on the vertical line the cognitive demand, that proceeds from the lowest to the highest, and on the horizontal line the language that may be more or less embedded in a context, provided for instance by situations, non-verbal supports to secure understanding, face-to-face communication. The context is considered an important element to highlight the meaning: experiences in bilingual studies show that children are able to manifest much higher levels of cognitive performance when the task is embedded in a concrete context (Baker, 2002).

Gathering all these different elements – language level, cognitive demand, context – Cummins’s quadrant allows us to get a first classification of materials and activities in four principal groups, indicated in Figure 1 (Barbero, 2003).

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**Figure 1**

![Figure 1](image)
However, we need more detailed instruments in order to:

- describe CLIL competences
- integrate cognitive competences to linguistic competences
- elaborate didactic paths
- evaluate and find criteria for assessment
- assess learners’ performances

Our aim is to build a framework where cognitive competences and linguistic competences are described in terms of difficulty, ranging from the lowest to the highest level.

Our first schema, a kind of conceptual framework based on class observation allowed us to formulate CLIL descriptors for the “basic user” level of linguistic competence.

Developing thinking skills in a CLIL class of Science in English (a case study)

A CLIL approach develops thinking skills and consequently enhances language acquisition. We have observed this process in a primary school class that represents a sort of case study clarifying our thesis; our considerations anyway may be easily transferred to other age levels as processes are the same in their logic progression.

Lucy is a teacher in a primary school in the outskirts of Turin. She teaches Maths, Sciences, Geography and English. Every day she develops part of her lessons in English, but she has chosen to experience more CLIL modules in Science, this means that about 60% of the content in this subject is taught in English, 40% in Italian, the pupils’ mother tongue.

We need to notice that in Italy, English is compulsory in primary schools, but teachers may be specialist in English or they are able to teach English as a class teacher. In the former case this means teachers teach only English to different classes and they can collaborate with subject teachers if they choose a CLIL approach. This situation is similar to team teaching in secondary schools. In the second case the class teacher includes English in her/his teaching. This situation is more similar to bilingual schools.

Lucy belongs to the latter category.

Her class is composed of 22 children aged 11, in the last year of primary school.

The Science syllabus of the second term of the year is focused on human body functions, compared with other organisms.

During the Science lesson pupils are divided into two groups and the lesson is organised as a workshop experience. Pupils move to the science laboratory, a room equipped with scientific instruments, books, posters and pictures.

A CLIL approach offers a valid alternative to a model of teaching and learning founded on transmission of knowledge; it aims to build “knowledge as construction instead of instruction” (Marsh, 2007). In this case study examples are given of how it is possible to progress step by step from more contextualized learning towards more abstract and conceptualised forms of knowledge. New information is connected to students’ background and experience, and strategies are used to scaffold the students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills towards a progressive autonomy.
Building background

- **Linking to past learning**
  
  Research emphasizes that in order for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with what the learner already knows. So it is important for teachers to make explicit connections between new learning and the material, vocabulary and concepts previously covered in class. There are different ways to establish links between past learning and new learning: teacher’s questions, graphic organizers, written reminders, activities (Echevarria et al., 2004).

  In this case the teacher proposes a labelling activity to revise vocabulary and principal concepts about the human body. The children, working in groups, are involved in a task that stimulates skills as remembering, knowing, recognizing.

- **Providing experience**
  
  The content understanding and learning level of difficulty does not only depend on the knowledge of the language but on the more or less extended presence of a context. In other words context embedded communication, where there is a good degree of support, is easier to understand than context reduced communication. Consequently “language and content will be acquired most successfully when students are challenged cognitively but provided with the contextual and linguistic supports”. Optimal instruction for linguistic, cognitive and content growth will move from context embedded tasks to context reduced tasks (Cummins, 2000).

  In our case study the teacher provides experience in the following way: she asks the children to take their pulse rate. Then she asks them to carry out a physical activity, jumping, running etc and afterwards to take their pulse rate again.

  The choice of a concrete experience is important in this context. Although not all subjects can be dealt with in the same way, science is a subject that can be approached in both an experiential and theoretical way.

Scaffolding the learning

“Scaffolding is a term associated with Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the difference between what a child can accomplish alone and what she/he can accomplish with the assistance of a more experienced individual. In the classroom, teachers scaffold instruction when they provide a substantial amount of support and assistance in the earliest stages of teaching a new concept or strategy and then decrease the amount of support as the learners acquire experience through multiple practice opportunities” (Echevarria et al., 2004, 86).

The objective is to help learners towards increasing autonomy, this aim may be achieved in different ways using different techniques, so scaffolding may be: verbal, procedural or instructional (Echevarria et al., 2004).

In our case study, language is used to conceptualise the learners’ experience. Here the language is used in its cognitive dimension; it is used to learn and not to communicate.

As we have seen the teacher has provided experience inviting children to count their pulse beats before a physical activity and after it. After that children are given a grid where they have to fill in the data of their experience: how many beats before? How many beats after? They are invited to predict and guess the heart functions. At the end the children have to draw conclusions. However, this task would be too complex, as the language competence achieved by most of them is A2 level; therefore the teacher provides them with a text where some key words have been deleted and the pupils have to fill them in. In this way their cognitive effort is
supported by language and they may reach a relatively high cognitive level.

We can deduce that the purpose of language support tasks is to support learners in their use of the L2 and thus allow them to focus on subject-matter contents. There is a balance here: the student has to focus on both language and content; if we can reduce the language demands, we can free some mental processing capacity which can be devoted to focussing on content. Language support tasks operate at a number of language levels. They normally support the learner at the level of vocabulary, grammar, function or textual organisation, and in listening, speaking, reading or writing. They may offer support at a number of these levels simultaneously. They can also provide strong or weak support and can often be adjusted to suit the degree of support which the learner needs (Barbero et al., 2005).

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Evaluating and communicating the results

In this experience we have seen that the language is used to support content learning. It enhances cognitive processes by triggering mental processes and improving thinking skills such as:

a. collecting information
b. rearranging it
c. predicting results
d. drawing conclusions

In this case the language structures the experience; it allows the learners to proceed from a concrete contextual learning to a more abstract and conceptualised form of knowledge. But language in CLIL is also used to communicate. In this case it is used, at the end of the didactic path, to talk about the experience and compare the results.

Children are gathered in pairs where each one has to communicate to the other the results of his/her experience and compare them. The teacher again provides a model as a support both for the question to ask (“What is your fastest/slowest pulse rate?”) and for the answer to give (“My fastest pulse rate is…”). However, while practicing, we noticed that some children asked questions and answered autonomously by using their own structures.

It is a true task, in the same sense suggested by the CEFR: “Communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in interaction, production, reception or mediation, or a combination of two or more of these…” (CEFR, electronic version, chapter 7). Exactly as it is recommended, this task comes at the end, supported by previous experience and linguistic structures: “Successful task accomplishment may be facilitated by the prior activation of the learner’s competences, for example, in the initial problem-posing or goal-setting phase of a task by providing or raising awareness of necessary linguistic elements, by drawing on prior knowledge and experience to activate appropriate schemata, and by encouraging task planning or rehearsal”.

We noticed that some children had also acquired a certain autonomy in executing this task: they chose their own structures to express their own experience instead of following the given model, as the task itself suggested what linguistic forms they needed to use, while allowing them the final choice (Ellis, 2003).

This allows us to conclude on two main statements of fact:

- **CLIL** promotes learning through activities that have the features of tasks: involving a primary focus on pragmatic meaning it motivates the learners to use the language to communicate contents, it involves cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning and evaluating information;
- **CLIL** enhances the second language acquisition more effectively, where acquisition is a kind of subconscious process similar to the way children develop ability in their first language (Krashen, 1995).
Integrating CLIL with CEFR

Here we represent the integration of CLIL with the CEFR in a diagram (Figure 2): on the horizontal line the framework levels and on the vertical one a cognitive taxonomy.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE LEVELS</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EVALUATION</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRINCIPLES (ANALYSIS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLASSIFICATION (EXPERIENCE)</td>
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Many taxonomies are available and the question of choice should be further investigated.

We have chosen Mohan’s levels since they combine higher order thinking skills with their linguistic manifestation (Järvinen, 2008, 9), inside a process similar to the one we mentioned earlier, proceeding from the context – embedded to the context -reduced language (Cummins, 2000, 65).

So, the optimal sequencing in language instruction proceeds from *experiential learning*, to *general concepts*, up to “*theoretical content*”.

We have attempted to provide descriptors for these three levels as shown in Figure 3.
The linguistic standard of the learners in this class varies from A1 to A2 level. At this level pupils need to be supported with language structures given by the teacher in order to express cognitive contents.

*Scaffolding* is therefore needed to support the learning. However some of the pupils, as we have seen, chose their structures themselves, their competences progressing from *basic user* towards *independent user*.

### Conclusions

The experience so far carried out seems to confirm that the CEFR and CLIL can successfully be integrated. This form of integration can be useful in language and even in subject teaching. Our examples are from the scientific fields, but we think that more can be done in other fields e.g. the humanities.

Our research highlights the possibility of providing descriptors. At present we have tried to give an example for the basic user levels (A1/A2), but we need to go further in order to complete the grid in relation to the other levels, e.g.: independent users (B1/B2), and proficient users (C1/C2).
References


