In this article, John Clegg states the importance of CLIL teachers collaborating with others to create a powerful learning system.

Teachers who teach their subject in a second language often have to collaborate. Of course we know that all teachers need to collaborate for one reason or another, but CLIL teachers need it more than most. I’d like to list the people they need to collaborate with and the reasons they need to do so.

Firstly, subject teachers need to collaborate with other subject teachers who are teaching in L2. The reason is that they are often not sure that they are doing the right thing. Teaching a subject in a second language is not easy: it requires a specialist pedagogical expertise. Teachers have to think about things which they don’t have to think about when working in their L1. They have to know how to talk in an especially comprehensible way, how to support learners when they listen to them, how to teach a lot of academic vocabulary, how to help learners talk back to them in the plenary classroom and talk in English in groups, how to read complex subject textbooks and write about new subject concepts in L2. Few subject teachers are trained to do this and they often feel the need to talk through with a colleague what they do in the classroom. Collaboration between subject teachers working in L2 can be very helpful: teachers can exchange ideas, trial techniques, report back to each other, develop strategies which are seen to work. Within the framework of formal school policy on raising achievement in L2-medium subjects, this kind of working together can develop official school practice and increase effectiveness – and ultimately grades – in L2-medium teaching.

Secondly, schools may wish to collaborate with each other for similar reasons. Schools differ widely in their capacity to attain high levels of achievement in subjects taught through L2. Some are clearly good at it; others not. It’s normally a matter of expertise: some schools have accumulated, documented and sustained it; others are new to it. In the absence of teacher-education in CLIL – which is rare – it is crucial to go to the best schools to find out how to do it. Schools and teachers which feel the need to get experience will do well to form a collaborative partnership with other schools in the neighbourhood – or even further afield, perhaps via the internet or by means of international partnerships – in order to become better at what they are doing.

Thirdly, the most crucial form of collaboration is between subject teachers and language teachers. Where both learners and subject teachers are adequately fluent in English, it is possible that neither needs help from an English language teacher. This situation may occur in countries with high ambient levels of English language ability. However, it often happens that in English-medium education programmes where levels of language ability amongst both teachers and learners are dangerously low, English language teachers have not been involved with the programme. They are not active either in helping subject colleagues with their teaching or in orientating their English curriculum to the language demands of English-medium subject learning. This can happen even in large-scale, system-wide, English-medium subject programmes. For example, there is evidence that in the Malaysian EM maths and science programme, the English curriculum, English language textbooks and English language teacher-training were not re-orientated to the language demands of EM science and maths. To neglect the crucial positive influence of English teaching on English-medium subject teaching, where that influence could contribute to raising EM subject achievement, is to put the success of such a project at risk.

In smaller, selective EM/CLIL projects such as are found in Europe, the role of English teachers can be crucial. Some forms of CLIL, for example, low-risk projects which may only offer one out of three hours of EM subject teaching per week over 20 weeks, it is common for English teachers to be full collaborative partners with a subject teacher in the project. They may be its instigators. In addition, the subject teacher may feel sufficiently unconfident in their English language ability so that the project can only run if an English language teacher in centrally involved. In this case, both teachers collaborate on a range of
functions: co-planning of a scheme of work, co-planning of lessons, co-construction of materials, co-assessment of performance, co-evaluation of the project as a whole. Sometimes both teachers co-teach in the same classroom, though expense normally precludes this. This kind of project is especially common in Italy; the extent and rich professional rewards of this form of collaboration are a hallmark of this kind of CLIL.

In more high-risk CLIL programmes where the whole of a subject is taught in English, perhaps for some years, collaboration with an English teacher is also important. There are two main ways in which the expertise of the English teacher can be brought to bear on the EM subject programme. The first is by helping learners. English teachers can do this by orientating the English language syllabus – in respect of the CLIL programme – partly to the language demands of the subject curriculum. Subject-teaching makes language demands on learners. Some of these demands are specific to the subject and can only be met by the subject teacher. Subject-specific vocabulary is a case in point, as are some aspects of subject-specific written and spoken discourse and learning activities. Some subject language demands, however, are not specific to the subject but specific to school learning; that is, they are cross-curricular in their application. This is the case with a lot of cross-curricular academic vocabulary at a middle level of specificity; it is also true of some more generic forms of formal written discourse and of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) for school use. Language teachers can teach these skills better then subject teachers; and subject teachers feel burdened by the necessity to teach them. The language curriculum can thus be re-orientated to accommodate these academic language skills and English teachers can accustom themselves – or indeed be trained – to teach them. This orientation of language teachers to the subject curriculum is at the heart of the way English language support for minority language users in the UK curriculum, for example, defines itself. EAL (English as an Additional Language) is largely a form of language support for subject learning, and EAL teachers are specialists in providing learners with the means of meeting the language demands of the subject curriculum. Language teachers within CLIL projects have not yet got used to seeing themselves in this role, but there is every reason why they should.

The second way in which language teachers can influence good practice in CLIL projects is by helping their subject colleagues. They have some of the skills to do so. They can, for instance, advise subject teachers on their own language use, on the language demands of their subjects and on the kinds of language support practice which the subject teachers can incorporate into their lessons. They can also work with them on planning schemes of work, making materials and assessment. Language teachers, however, are not used to doing this and they do not by training possess all the skills necessary. They have to be open-minded, undaunted by subject contents and learn some new tricks. In addition, this kind of collaboration has to be paid for: it must be accounted for in teachers’ timetables.

Collaboration can be an informal, bottom-up process: teachers work with each other if they get on well and if the enterprise is professionally interesting. However, this form of collaboration is rather hit-and-miss. A school with ambitious CLIL pretensions will wish to instigate formal administrative frameworks for collaboration which set out the purposes, means and requirements of the collaborating parties and acknowledge this formally and even contractually. School policy on CLIL development will require collaboration to take place and set out objectives and performance indicators which aim to raise EM subject achievement in specified ways. Formal collaborative planning agreements of this kind are also common in the UK EAL sector where they go by the name of ‘partnership teaching’. These collaborative frameworks are not yet common in CLIL contexts, but they are necessary wherever schools need to maintain standards in subjects taught through the medium of L2.

Collaboration in CLIL is not as common as it should be. In low-risk, language-led projects - often started by a language teacher - collaboration is widespread. But in subject-led CLIL, where a relatively high language level of teachers and learners is crucial in order that subject standards be maintained, it is too rare. In system-wide programmes in which every child in the school may be learning maths or science through L2, and where the language ability of both teachers and learners may be dangerously low, you need to use every weapon in your armoury to achieve acceptable levels of subject knowledge. In these contexts, English language teachers need to play as full a part as possible.