The Effects of CLIL from the Perspective of Experienced Teachers

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Abstract
This reports on the results of qualitative research carried out on a group of eleven Italian primary school teachers accustomed to using CLIL in their teaching. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data regarding the effects of steady, multiyear exposure to CLIL. This research is based on the assumption that teachers who have lengthy experience with the CLIL approach constitute an invaluable source of information facilitating the understanding of what renders CLIL successful. As a consequence, the teachers’ longitudinal experiences are deeply and organically explored, taking into account specific indicators. The strongest and the weakest aspects of CLIL are analysed from a “privileged” perspective. This chapter also discusses the impact of CLIL on teachers’ professional development.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), EFL teaching, primary education, teachers’ professional development; teachers’ profile

1. Introduction
CLIL is experiencing exponential interest in Europe. Networks and projects, funded by the European Union, intend to contribute to the development of CLIL teaching, to promote its adoption and to foster cooperation in the implementation of specific CLIL programmes. They also favour the exchange of information about CLIL practice and the setting up of training opportunities for teachers.

Italy is involved in many of these projects and networks, providing expertise in the use of CLIL. However, CLIL has not spread all over Italy in a uniform way. There are some regions, especially in Northern Italy, which have been developing CLIL programmes for a decade and other regions which have only recently
become acquainted with this approach (Infante et al., 2008). The reasons for this heterogeneous development are various and cannot easily be fully explained. It would be superficial to blame the lack of clear action on behalf of the Ministry of Education as a justification for the absence of interest vis-à-vis CLIL by regional educational authorities and institutions. On the other hand, it is possible to state that it has been possible for CLIL to flourish and for Italy to gain a significant role in the European debate on CLIL thanks to the initiative of individuals working in certain Italian educational and academic institutions.

2. Analysis of the effects of CLIL: a methodological framework

It is not often easy to find teachers who are ready to implement CLIL teaching programmes. The main difficulties go beyond the prerequisite skills (knowledge of the target language and having a subject-area qualification) because the major challenge is in the relationship between language and content (Snow, 1998). In fact, despite their skills in the fields of language or subject, “not all the teachers are prepared to focus on content and language goals” (Mehisto et al., 2008, 21). For this reason, the role of the teacher is crucial in avoiding any tensions between these two aspects. Thus, on the one hand, the CLIL teacher can be considered as a manager of interaction, because he/she has to guarantee that “the discourse proceeds in an orderly manner” (Dalton-Puffer, 2007, 24). While on the other hand, the teacher has to gain the role of primary knower (Burton, 1981) because he/she is the one to have access to valid knowledge and truth.

As recently underlined (Ricci Garotti, 2007), it is not the label CLIL that guarantees quality in projects, instead a pivotal role for their success is played by methodology and teaching. This means that active approaches, proper strategies and techniques, as well as appropriate material and a varied repertoire of activities may represent the keys for the success of CLIL programmes. Teachers have the delicate task of choosing the right activity, the most involving strategy or material in order to catch the students’ attention and to make CLIL work. For this reason, we judged it necessary to focus on teachers experienced in CLIL in order to fully understand what renders CLIL successful and what the basic devices are that bring about a balance between language and content. Our research was based on the assumption that these teachers can represent an invaluable source of information regarding the effects of the CLIL approach in contexts where there has been constant exposure to it for years. Not only were we interested in the positive dimension of CLIL, we also wanted to find out what limits the development of CLIL in the educational context.

In the ongoing parallel research study that we have been carrying out for two years on a group of Italian classes regarding the effectiveness of CLIL at primary school level (Infante et al., 2008), our attention is particularly focused on the experimental and quantitative dimension. Since the qualitative matrix of CLIL teaching seems to be as important as the quantitative aspect, we considered it necessary to collect and then to analyse the impressions and the viewpoints of the teachers involved in CLIL projects for years. In order to accomplish this research, we have considered the following indicators:

- quality of reflection: this refers to the process of reflection on one’s own teaching and profession that taking part to a CLIL project has activated;
- quality of school organization: this refers to the level and kind of collaboration among teachers and the flexibility that CLIL projects imply;
2.1 Instruments
Two instruments were used in this research: a) a questionnaire, and b) a telephone interview. We decided to adopt both because telephone interviews allowed us to build on teacher questionnaire responses.

a. The questionnaire appeared to be the most feasible instrument to reach teachers in the sample, who come from different areas of Italy. The questionnaire, which includes forty items, was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. It is divided into three sections. The first one, formed by seven items, was intended to collect personal and background data while the second one, consisting of nineteen items, was designed to collect information about the training experience and the interests of the teachers. Most of these questions were closed-ended, often taking the form of multiple-choice questions. The third section included ten open-ended and two closed questions about the teacher’s CLIL experience. These questions required more thought from the participants and more care in interpretation because they asked for unprompted opinions and solicited subjective data. The questionnaire ends with a blank free text area where possible for teacher comments and suggestions.

b. Some teachers gave short answers to some of the written questions or they did not answer them at all. In these cases, we interviewed the teachers to fill in the missing answers. In other cases, the interview was useful in order to clarify some answers or to expand on the information provided.

2.2. Sampling
We took into consideration some CLIL experiences at the primary school level in Italy (Infante et al., 2008) and gathered together a sample of 11 experienced CLIL teachers from three different regions situated in Northern Italy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>AREA</th>
<th>NUMBER OF TEACHERS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lombardy</td>
<td>Como, Mantova, Milan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piedmont</td>
<td>Turin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veneto</td>
<td>Treviso, Venice</td>
<td>4</td>
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These teachers have been defined as testimoni privilegiati (privileged witnesses) because most of them began working in CLIL from the start of its introduction in Italy some ten years ago. In Lombardy and Piedmont there is a well-established CLIL tradition at the primary level while in Veneto the first CLIL experiences at primary school are more recent. From the analysis of the questionnaires, we have outlined the professional profile of the CLIL teachers involved in this research. They are women and have a full time contract. Eight of them are in the 41-50 year old bracket and the average number of years teaching is twenty-three. Nine teachers are specialisti (teaching only the English Language), one teacher is aspecializzata (teaching the English language and other subjects) and one teacher is teaching English at the
lower secondary school after spending ten years as a primary school teacher. Half of them are graduates (Foreign Languages, Primary Education and Sociology) and have studied English at school and at university. Only one teacher declares that she has attended a private course of English instead of learning it at school. All of them attended professional training courses in the English language. Apart from one teacher, all the others have been to English-speaking countries. Most of them have attended several courses of English language teaching abroad. All the teachers declare that they possess a high competence in using the English language: five teachers state having a B2 level; three teachers have a C1 level and three teachers a C2 level. On the other hand, none of the teachers are proficient in another foreign language. Only two teachers indicate having a level of B1 in Spanish and Portuguese. Most of the teachers passed a test to obtain a certificate specifying their knowledge of the English language. They attend refresher courses at least once a year. Half of the sampled teachers are members of at least one association of language teachers and they often make use of English in their private lives (chatting, writing emails, and watching movies, reading books and magazines…).

We were particularly interested in data regarding projects related to CLIL. Each teacher reported taking part in at least one experimental project. In particular, most of the teachers from Lombardy took part in the ILSSE (Teaching Foreign Languages at Elementary School) project which presented significant innovations in English language teaching at primary school level (Benevene, 2000). The teachers from Piedmont took part in projects concerning the European Language Portfolio and the introduction of foreign languages at nursery school (ex art. 278). One of the teachers from Veneto took part in two research-action projects about the use of cooperative learning in English language teaching. All of the 11 teachers participated in CLIL projects implemented by regional education authorities or academic institutions.

Another important aspect concerns the experience as a teacher trainer. Apart from one teacher, all have assumed this role and most have been teacher trainers in projects related to CLIL. Four teachers have published either CLIL articles or books and teaching material at a national and even international level. As for their own training in CLIL, most of these teachers have attended academic post-graduate courses on CLIL, courses organized by local education authorities and foreign universities.

As for the number of years of CLIL teaching, teachers from Piedmont and Lombardy have ten years of experience while teachers from Veneto have fewer years of experience.

3. The perspective on CLIL from experienced teachers

According to the indicators set at the beginning of our research, a series of questions were developed to stimulate and record the teachers’ reflections. In this way, their longitudinal experience could be deeply and organically explored.

3.1. Reflection
Significant impressions about CLIL can be obtained by analysing the second part of the questionnaire which asked the teachers to reflect on their CLIL experience. By reading the answers provided by the teachers, it can be seen that a process of reflection started off with the first answers as evidenced by such expressions as “I was convinced that...but now I’m realising that...”, “At the beginning I used to...but now I am convinced that...”, “In the past I believed that...but now I find it easier to...”. These sentences are symptomatic of a consciousness raising process that leads the teachers to have an approach to CLIL that is different from the one they had at the beginning of their experience. They are personally reconceptualising CLIL. This dynamic change, favoured by the practical use of CLIL and by their strong training background, is very important in order to understand what teachers thought about CLIL when they started using it and what caused them to alter their views. By interpreting what teachers wrote, it is clear that their new perspective on CLIL is the consequence of a series of obstacles and restrictions that they had to face during their daily CLIL practice. They declare that in the course of time they gradually learned to cope with these and to create all the necessary conditions to overcome them. Some of the teachers firmly support the importance of being flexible, collaborative and creative when using CLIL. This idea is more sustained by the teachers with a longer CLIL experience. It is not surprising that in the last multiple-choice question these teachers answered that their CLIL experience is extremely positive while the teachers with a shorter experience judged it as simply positive. It is evident that the teachers who have already overcome a series of difficulties are more inclined to see the general experience as extremely positive than the teachers who are still facing a series of obstacles.

It is clear that some variables were underestimated by the teachers at the beginning of their approach to CLIL, such as the lack of specific CLIL materials and the consequent creation of new ones, the collaboration with colleagues to make CLIL work better and an accurate planning of the task to establish a balance between language and content. In spite of these problems, an important aspect of CLIL remained unchanged over time. It is represented by a steady belief in the effectiveness of CLIL. In particular, one of the teachers from Lombardy stated “I have always been convinced that CLIL is an effective approach because I experienced it while studying Science at a British university. I realized that I was improving my English as well as my skills in the Italian language”. During the interview, she was asked to clarify in which way learning Science in English could have affected her Italian. She replied that she found the way of studying Science in English very different from the way she was accustomed to studying. She learned to synthesize, to organize her thoughts better and to be more immediate and concise in communication. These aspects affected her way of writing in Italian as well. In her opinion, an evident impact on the cognitive sphere took place, apart from the improvement of the linguistic and content dimension. It is interesting to note that other teachers have also underlined the benefits that CLIL provides to the cognitive dimension. One of the teachers wrote: “CLIL is an opportunity to improve the language as well as the students’ motivation but also their ability to synthesise” while another one wrote that the English language allows students “to learn how to learn the subject content, improving the linguistic, cognitive and social dimension”. A teacher from Piedmont asserted that “CLIL activates both cognitive processes and a specific language that can’t be framed in a sequential syllabus. (...) I believe that it is essential to analyse first the cognitive dimension of the target content in order to activate personalized teaching methods which may favour different cognitive styles and individual learning strategies. Secondly it is necessary to analyse the linguistic aspects of the content”. In one of the answers at the end of the questionnaire, the same teacher makes the point that teachers need to know the theoretical fundaments of CLIL, otherwise they risk venturing into unimportant projects characterized by simple translations of texts from Italian to English without paying any attention to their linguistic and content difficulties.
The issue of integrating language and content is built into the questionnaire from the very first question. When they are asked what they think CLIL’s aim is, teachers answer in a variety of ways. However, in almost all the teachers’ definitions the words language and content and the concept of integration are always present. For one of the teachers, adopting CLIL means “teaching content through the English language using final tests both in English and in the mother-tongue language”. For another teacher, CLIL is “a methodology which integrates a target language with target content thanks to innovative techniques”. It is interesting the way in which some other definitions have been linguistically given. It seems that these teachers want to underline the fact that CLIL does not have to be considered as an approach useful only for the language. They succeed in rendering this message by postponing the word language and placing more emphasis on the word content. In fact, one teacher states “...learning contents and at the same time, learning, as a collateral effect of the interaction, a foreign language” or “CLIL allows students to master the fundamental concepts of content through English as a vehicular language”. On the other hand, we do not exclude the presence of definitions where more emphasis is given to the language, such as “I view CLIL as the utilisation of a foreign language (...) to transmit competences that are not exclusively linked to the language”.

3.2. Collaboration
According to the teachers, the integration of language and content is mainly possible through the collaborative and collective planning of work where different aspects should be taken into consideration. In particular, two teachers from Lombardy wrote: “I learned to plan my lessons in a multidisciplinary way, including objectives, prerequisites, materials and tests typical of other subjects” and “I felt the need to include the cross-curricular competences in my planning”. The idea of what happens during the planning activity is brilliantly expressed by one of the two teachers from Piedmont who uses the word “negotiation” to mean the exchange of ideas between the language and the content teachers to avoid meaningless transpositions of content from one language to the other. As a consequence, another key word that is often used throughout the questionnaire appears. It is ‘collaboration’ that, in the teachers’ opinion, represents one of the conditions that ensures the success of CLIL. Some teachers registered an increase in collaboration with their colleagues thanks to CLIL while others blame their colleagues for being passive and interested in the project only when they have to ‘communicate the new content topic’ to them. This means that they do not help in the planning and they ‘don’t take the idea of collaborating together seriously’. As a result, the CLIL teachers feel alone and supported only by a few colleagues. One of the teachers identifies the possible reasons for this conduct as resulting from the increase of both the number of working hours and of the workload. On the other hand, two teachers reveal that although their colleagues show a real interest in the project, they feel that the lack of knowledge of the target language represents a real barrier for them. For this reason, they feel incapable of helping and prefer not to interfere with the project.

3.3. Materials
The constant exchange of ideas and the ‘valorisation of one’s own linguistic and disciplinary competences’ are deemed necessary by the CLIL teachers to grant a certain level of quality to CLIL projects. Help from colleagues is wished especially for the preparation of CLIL materials which, as strongly underlined in the literature (Coonan, 2002; Serragiotto, 2003), are insufficient in the Italian context. As reported by the teachers, one of the main obstacles for the development of CLIL is the lack of available materials. As a
result, they must be designed, created ad hoc by teachers or adapted to the primary school level, using web resources and authentic texts as references. In fact, one of the teachers asserts ‘Most of the material that I use is ‘teacher-generated’ in the sense that I adapt it to my class. (...) The authentic texts represent a great resource but it is necessary to pay attention to them because they need to be adapted both for the language and for the content to suit the level of the class’.

3.4. Methodology
Most of the teachers underline that it is fundamental to use objects and lots of images in CLIL classes, especially to present new words. In their opinion, the most successful activities are the ones that imply the active participation and the realization of something concrete. For some teachers, it is better to pay more attention to oral communication while for others it is advisable to propose activities, such as filling tables, reading and matching, finishing incomplete sentences, and jigsaw reading, in order to stimulate the development of written communication. It is also important to arrange activities which favour the development of thinking skills. Activities that imply making predictions, hypothesizing, collecting and comparing data are reported as being part of the linguistic and disciplinary dimension, as well as the cognitive sphere. Specific strategies, such as, for example, repeating, reformulating and summarizing several times what has just been said, might be adopted to offer a rich input to students from the perspective of language and content.

Great emphasis is given by the teachers to the communicative environment which needs to be real, not simulated, comfortable and safe and where the students can feel free to express themselves without any anxiety. In particular, one of the teachers clarifies that in a CLIL context the emphasis should be on the fluency and on the intelligibility of the output rather than on the accuracy. Moreover, in order to create a relaxed atmosphere some teachers propose adopting some cooperative learning techniques. But regarding this point, some teachers are quite skeptical. One of them says that she tried to use them ‘...but since my class was not accustomed to working cooperatively and since I didn’t have any experience, I experienced many difficulties’. Another teacher says that since ‘cooperative learning is very complex, because it implies being used to a certain type of work and the correct use of the language, CLIL activities at primary school level can be better defined as collaborative rather than cooperative’.

As for the difficulties encountered by pupils, some teachers reported their impressions on how their pupils usually experience an initial feeling of awe and fear at not being up to CLIL at the beginning of a project. Luckily, these feelings gradually disappear and pupils become more and more confident in the new environment. Another problem is the difficulty in using the language spontaneously, unless specific teaching activities are arranged to encourage the children to use it. One of the teachers explains this aspect stating that this limit is caused by the low level of the target language that does not allow pupils to express themselves freely. On the other hand, another teacher is convinced, on the basis of her experience, that passive language plays a decisive role in a following stage. In her opinion, what seems to be a lack of learning in the initial stage is only an impression. This is because the learning process is slower at the beginning, but it grants surprising results with the passing of time. In the teachers’ opinion, CLIL generally motivates pupils to learn the target language. This is because they feel that the language they are using has a concrete goal and because they have the possibility to contextualize the language in a real and not artificial setting. From the point of view of one of the teachers, the pupils’ attention is focused on the content and
thanks to the use of ‘all their learning channels, pupils overcome their inhibition in the linguistic output’. Only one teacher asserted that CLIL does not enhance the motivation to learn the target language, because at primary school ‘the foreign language is not a ‘need’ and for this reason it doesn’t represent a real reason for an improvement of interest’. The same teacher is also convinced that CLIL does not improve the pupils’ motivation towards the content because ‘the lack of proper strategies to facilitate communicative exchanges renders the process of learning the target content more tiring and more difficult’. Another teacher asserts that CLIL does not improve the motivation to learn the content, because her colleagues adopt interactive strategies to teach their subjects and so their pupils do not perceive the difference between the traditional teaching and the CLIL one. The rest of the teachers are convinced that CLIL motivates pupils to learn content because they feel that they are learning in a more involving and interesting way and, although at the beginning they consider this experience a challenge, they are rewarded by the success of the experience.

4. Conclusions

The experienced CLIL teachers admitted having some problems throughout their experience in carrying out CLIL projects, such as the lack of materials available, the absence of collaboration in the planning stage, the lack of interest from the teachers of the same class or of the same school, as well as having difficulties in properly integrating content and language, and creating an authentic and real setting in the classroom. Although these problems are reported and discussed by the teachers, their overall impression of CLIL is positive. This can be explained by the fact that the teachers always propose a solution to each of the problems that is envisaged, thanks to their expertise and to their motivation. Of course, this attitude to make things work has generated over time an excessive or, as one of the teachers says, ‘a very heavy’ workload for them. By reading the answers of the teachers, it is easy to understand that it is their passion for this approach and their firm conviction that it really works that leads them to see the positive side of the coin and to overcome possible obstacles. But some of these problems still remain open especially for those teachers who are new to CLIL. For this reason, in several answers, the CLIL teachers continuously ask for substantial and systematic training. One of the teachers says that CLIL ‘has so far been characterized by a bottom-up push. Now it’s time for an institutional top-down push!’ Moreover, the teachers suggest creating national and international virtual environments where it is possible for CLIL teachers to meet, to exchange ideas and materials so that ‘saving time in creating what has already been designed by someone else’ can be possible. Moreover, they propose the institution of a centralized observatory on CLIL so that projects and experiences can be monitored and a network created. Another important need felt by some of the teachers is the connection between the school and the academic world. They wish the results coming from research and surveys on CLIL to be spread among teachers.

We firmly believe that an important aspect, notwithstanding present difficulties, that makes the teachers so enthusiastic about CLIL is the impact that it has on the way they teach outside CLIL contexts. The role of CLIL as a ‘catalyst for change’ (Marsh et al., 2001, 51) and the ‘real added value of CLIL’ (Ricci Garotti, 2007, 134) are clearly perceived by the sampled teachers. In their opinion the methodological innovations, the creation of a new context and new practices, are neither artificial nor simulated, helped teachers to become more flexible and to partially change their methodology and the way of organizing their non-CLIL. In
particular, one of the teachers wrote that ‘thanks to CLIL I could improve my teaching’. Moreover, the new and wider way of planning CLIL actions seems to register a positive impact on the way these teachers generally plan. As we can read: ‘I have re-used what I have learned in the CLIL context to plan my traditional lessons of English’ and ‘My planning is now less fragmentary and more organic than before’.

Another effect of CLIL is the improvement of the teachers’ level of reflection. The CLIL teachers have learned to plan, to act and to teach differently. It is obvious that this shift was the consequence of a gradual process of reflection on what drives CLIL. Also, in the answers to some specific questions that implied a reflection on the development of their CLIL practice, teachers have demonstrated the ability to reflect and to motivate some of the changes. Their continuous learning and problem solving experiences and their constant reflection-in-action has contributed to render them, as Schön (1983) defines, reflective practitioners. And this is partially due to CLIL.

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