CLIL IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS: THE ISSUE OF CONTENT
TEACHERS’ COMPETENCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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1. FOREWORD

Most Italian upper schools will have to offer at least one subject in a foreign language as part of the national curriculum starting next year, in compliance with what provided for by a recent school reform affecting secondary school\textsuperscript{3}. This paper reports some of the results of a survey carried out in 2011 in order to get the feel of the teachers’ expectations, fears and thoughts in the wake of the ‘CLIL revolution’\textsuperscript{4}. As it frequently happens in our country, reality is quite different from the ideal world on which some projects seem to be tailored: as will be argued, although both the first data presented by the Ministry of Education regarding the foreign language competence of non-language teachers and the quantitative part of our data would seem to indicate there

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\textsuperscript{3} Even though it seems Italy is reacting rather late to the EU policy on CLIL matters, CLIL is still on the agenda of the EU being part of a set of actions in the field of education: it is part of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ("ET 2020"), as confirmed by the Directorate General for Education and Culture- Directorate A, in the person of Mr Luca Tomasi (the authors had personal correspondence on CLIL matters). In the 2011 “Council conclusions on language competences to enhance mobility” CLIL is recommended as a teaching tool: “While general language programmes help to develop essential communication skills for everyday use, methodologies such as content and language-integrated learning (CLIL) in both general education and VET can be particularly effective in enhancing the mobility and employability of workers.” (VET stands for Vocational Education and Training). The Council also adds: “In order to promote CLIL, teachers and trainers - in particular in VET - should be encouraged to acquire high quality language competences and should have access to high quality teaching resources.” (European Council, 2011, Council conclusions on language competences to enhance mobility, 3128th EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE and SPORT Council meeting Brussels, 28 and 29 November 2011 <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/Newsroom>).
\textsuperscript{4} Due to space constraints, this is just an abstract of what will be reported in a longer essay by the same authors (Di Martino & Di Sabato 2012) and in two papers in Italian (Di Martino forthcoming a, Di Martino forthcoming b).
is no real worry about the successful implementation of the project, the qualitative data we collected, but also subsequent and (in our opinion) more reliable information from the Ministry seem to contradict this reassuring picture\textsuperscript{5}.

1.1. State of the art

Much progress has been made in Italy over the last 15 years, especially thanks to the implementation of the TIE-CLIL project coordinated by Langé between 1998 and 2002; to the work of Coonan and of Langé, both very active in widespread the ‘CLIL word’ especially in Northern Italy; but also thanks to many anonymous teachers working in CLIL environments for personal choice (see Di Sabato & Cordisco 2006 for CLIL at university level; Cardona 2008 for experiences at school level)\textsuperscript{6}. It seems the time has come to introduce CLIL paths more systematically in the school system.

The project, introduced by the ex-Minister for Education, Gelmini, and approved by the previous Government, provides for the teaching in a foreign language of a non-language subject matter whether it be curricular or non-curricular\textsuperscript{7}. It does not take long

\textsuperscript{5} In order to ground our research in practice as profoundly as possible while also exploring the issue in terms of its meaning for the teachers involved, we opted for an genuinely qualitative investigation in the form of open-ended questionnaires (for a more detailed analysis of assets and liabilities of one such type of investigation, Di Martino 2004).

\textsuperscript{6} To briefly declare our point of view about CLIL, also based on our personal experience on CLIL projects at university level, in line with Coonan 2012, we feel that, thanks to cooperative work, the non-language subject matter teacher becomes more aware of “a whole series of issues and potential solutions that he is normally not aware of” (63). As to foreign language teacher, CLIL helps them acquire awareness of the value of words and texts in shaping contents and conveying the desired effect on the recipients in specific communicative contexts. But, most importantly, by confronting the learning strategies involved in the concurrent learning of language and content, the learner may acquire learning awareness of and radically change his/her attitude towards it. Also, the different organization of thought in relation to the specific area of study involved is strictly connected to the ability to communicate. Last but not least, these processes force the protagonists to concentrate on the functional aspect of language learning, which is also beneficial to those language teachers who unconsciously overfocus on the notional side (Di Sabato 2008).

\textsuperscript{7} "(...) l’insegnamento, in lingua straniera, di una disciplina non linguistica (CLIL) compresa nell’area delle attività e degli insegnamenti obbligatori per tutti gli studenti o nell’area degli insegnamenti attivabili dalle istituzioni scolastiche nei limiti del contingente di organico ad esse annualmente assegnato" (Quadri orari 2010). For the sake of completeness, it might be worth to specify that Italian school legislation looks at CLIL as a methodological approach which provides for the teaching in a foreign language of a non-language subject chosen among the ones which are compulsory or among those which can be activated as part of the curriculum in respect of that specific year’s estimated (and assigned) workforce: “approccio metodologico che prevede l’insegnamento di una disciplina non linguistica, in lingua straniera veicolare al fine di integrare l’apprendimento della lingua e l’acquisizione di contenuti disciplinari, creando ambienti di apprendimento che favoriscano atteggiamenti plurilingui e sviluppiamo la consapevolezza multiculturale” (Linee Guida per il passaggio al nuovo ordinamento/Guidelines 2010: 86).
to identify its weaknesses, for instance lack of attention to the feelings and needs of those required to work in the project, which ignores the focus CLIL experts lay on the involvement of all stakeholders: indeed, CLIL forces schools to rethink their pedagogy, and teachers, students, and families as well, need to feel they are part of a change\textsuperscript{8}; any reform, theoretically well grounded as it may be, might result in a failure for lack of that enthusiasm and commitment which is an indispensable prerequisite\textsuperscript{9}.

Moreover, the teachers affected by the reform are mostly in service secondary-school non-language teachers\textsuperscript{10}. This means the reform does not apply to foreign language teachers at all. And yet, up until now the content and language integration experiences recorded in our country are all due to the personal and deliberate commitment of language teachers and to the joint effort of such language teachers with their content colleagues.

2. THE ISSUE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

In order to be taken on CLIL training courses, content teachers must possess a language competence of level B1, at least\textsuperscript{11}: the 2010 measure will entail methodology courses for teachers willing to attend language courses aiming at C1 while attending methodology classes\textsuperscript{12}. This language formation will be carried out by University language centers and/or Faculties. The length of courses will be at least four years for

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\textsuperscript{8} See for instance what clearly stressed during the CLIL debate held in Cardiff in 2009, especially Patel 2009; Mehisto 2009. 
\textsuperscript{9} Our survey has allowed us to gather particularly interesting data about the teachers’ feelings, which essentially confirm the sense of frustration we suspected such a move by the Ministry, - i.e. to plan and write down the reform without any involvement of the protagonists – would generate.
\textsuperscript{10} “docenti di discipline non linguistiche di scuola secondaria di secondo grado a tempo indeterminato e a tempo determinato in possesso di abilitazione e inseriti a pieno titolo nell’a.s. 2010-2011 nelle graduatorie ad esaurimento previste dall’art. 1, c. 605, lettera e della legge 296/2006 e destinatari del D.M. 68 del 30/07/2010” (MIUR/Ministry of Education 2010).
\textsuperscript{11} The reference documents mention the “possesso di competenze linguistico-comunicative nella lingua veicolare di livello almeno B1 del Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento per le lingue del Consiglio d’Europa” as an entry requirement. Further down in the paper, in 2.2, we will touch upon the issue of the foreign language competence of CLIL teachers as a prerequisite for the success of such learning paths as testified by the literature on teachers’ language competence.
\textsuperscript{12} “I docenti in possesso di competenze C1 e C2 (ma anche quelli in possesso di competenze B2 che si impegnino a frequentare corsi per il raggiungimento del livello C1) avranno accesso diretto ai corsi di metodologia.”
teachers at level B1 and two years for those at level B2\textsuperscript{13}. As it might have been easy to foresee, the simple rumors about this reform gave way to enormous speculations with any language school offering any sort of CLIL language course to teachers. Better late than never, the Ministry has recently decided not to accept \textit{any} certification but only those recognised by the governments of the countries where the foreign languages to be certified are spoken (MIUR 2012b). While obviously welcoming the Ministerial will to clear the waters, we feel the decree has come too late to avoid speculations. But it is indeed good to hear the effort is not considered to have been accomplished once and for all: the decree states that the list of recognized certifications will be periodically updated (MIUR 2012b).

Restricting data to short term measures, one of the most relevant actions of the project is the methodological training of the teachers whose language competence falls within the C1 level of the CEF. A recent Ministerial decree (Dec 24, 2011) allows for universities to set up methodological courses for permanent teachers possessing the C2/C1 CEF level. This seems such a huge effort considering the poor number of teachers who stated to possess those levels of competence in the foreign language: for instance, taking one Northern and one Southern region as a sample, according to data collected by the Ministry of Education, in Lombardia the permanent teachers declaring a C2 level are 28, those at C1 are 53 (out of a total of 1087), and in Campania the permanent teachers declaring a C2 are 27, while 48 at C1 (out of 1142)\textsuperscript{14}. This measure has the evident objective to show the political intention to move forward but keeping an eye on what is actually feasible with available funds. To add more, the gradual plan of implementation should start from next year for the final classes of \textit{Liceo linguistico} (secondary school with a foreign languages curriculum), with a progressive involvement of the other secondary school curricula. But very recent data spoken out by the Ministry during a meeting with trade unions representatives (March 7, 2012) reveal there are no content teachers with a C1 level in a foreign language currently working in that position, and only about 300 possess a B2 level of competence. In spite of the goodwill of those in charge, the present economic situation and the difficulty to agree with the undoubtedly powerful school trade unions constitute an evident lack of the necessary

\textsuperscript{13} The language formation: “avrà la durata di almeno quattro anni per i docenti in possesso di competenze linguistico-comunicative di livello B1 e di almeno due anni per i docenti in possesso di competenze linguistico-comunicative di livello B2” (MIUR 2010).

\textsuperscript{14} MIUR: Dati Rilevazione CLIL Dicembre 2010 Lombardia. Dati Rilevazione dicembre 2010 Campania.
prerequisites to work on the reform implementation in the short term. Rumours on the
Web say the scheduled start will be postponed but at the moment this is being denied by
the Ministry.

2.1. Data from our survey

As to the data we personally collected, they have been elaborated on the basis of
the answers to our survey (52 filled-in questionnaires from upper-secondary school
teachers in the Naples area\(^\text{15}\)) and skimmed to better focus on the issue at hand, i.e. the
teachers’ language competence. The answers are of no statistical value: they were open-
ended and have been here reformulated in order to attempt that minimum of
generalisation that an investigation of the qualitative type would allow for\(^\text{16}\).

Going straight into the analysis of relevant data, the questionnaire asked the
teachers to assess their competence in the foreign language, with some even declaring
advanced competence in two languages, which we found quite surprising, since our
research actually started from the perception that Italian teachers were not linguistically
ready for the CLIL challenge, instead\(^\text{17}\). This result does not seem to be particularly
revealing of a gap existing between Northern and Southern Italy: in 2011 the Ufficio
Scolastico Regionale per la Lombardia, headed by Langé in cooperation with some
foreign cultural institutions, held some sessions of placement tests on a free basis to test
the level of competence of non-language teachers\(^\text{18}\), and the distribution of levels in this
experiment does not seem to be substantially different from the distribution we recorded.
However, it is worth stressing here that the Langé data are the result of an official
placement test while ours are just the result of self-declared competence. Despite the
different contexts and people involved, both surveys seem to be in sharp contrast with
our starting perceptions, which we feel, though, were essentially confirmed by the

\(^{15}\) We chose to survey the teachers working in the Naples area both due to our living and working there,
and because it is fairly well known that the Southern part of our country is lagging behind (we
consciously decided to use this verb to avoid any euphemism or false politically correct sensitivity).
\(^{16}\) A first-hand reference to teacher voice is in Di Martino forthcoming b.
\(^{17}\) The languages mentioned were English: 5 advanced competence, 16 intermediate, 15 beginner
competence; French: 1 advanced, 3 intermediate, 5 beginner; German: 1 advanced, 1 intermediate, 2
beginner; Spanish: 2 advanced; Modern Greek: 1 advanced.
\(^{18}\) Of the 108 teachers who took part on a voluntary basis, 61 revealed a competence in English between
B2 and C2; of the 30 who sat for the French test, 23 showed a competence at B2 level; of the 21 who
took German, 9 were between B2 and C1 (Langé 2011).
qualitative data we gathered, as we will soon argue. This might be due to the fact that individuals accepting to take part in a test on a voluntary basis are, in our experience, the most ‘prepared’ ones, those who are largely ready for the challenge ahead, and this is – we feel – also true of questionnaire participation. The teachers who took our survey did not seem, in fact, to be as much worried about their personal capacity in taking on the new task as they were in their colleagues’ lack of skills (and will) in facing the challenge, instead. This is, for example, the sharp attack that Dora, a 60 year-old Italian teacher at Liceo Linguistico, undertakes:

[...] si sono ‘prenotati’ docenti senza alcuna competenza non solo nella lingua straniera che dovrebbero utilizzare ma neanche nelle più moderne metodologie e tecnologie didattiche. Già si sente dire ‘Tanto spiego in italiano, chi controlla?’ E mi chiedo: perché sono stati esclusi i docenti di lingua che hanno sostenuto, per es., esami in storia, o in letteratura italiana, o storia dell’arte, ecc.?19

As for the question ‘What do you think of the recent reform in relation to CLIL in secondary schools?’20, 18 questionnaires revealed a positive attitude towards CLIL and only 6 questionnaires a negative predisposition, instead. However, the teachers who did not react to this specific question did not seem to show much trust in the positive reach of CLIL in their answers to the questions that followed this one. Moreover, while expressing their positive opinions, some of the teachers who reacted positively to this question also emphasised the need to consider that the moment has come to build up a real path of bilingualism in Italian schools starting from nursery school if we really want things to change significantly.

Amongst the negative opinions, two hit exactly where it hurts, emphasising two problematic areas of CLIL methodology of which both linguists and language educators alike are aware: the need to make sure the level of competence teachers have self-assessed actually corresponds to real competence; and the contradictory exclusion of language teachers tout court. We do not know what the situation is in other countries, but in Italy, as we hinted at above, it is nearly exclusively language teachers who have some experience with CLIL methodology (and they have mostly acquired it working on

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19 “Most teachers have declared they possess not only a competence in the foreign language, but also IT skills they do not have, really. ‘Who cares? I’m going to teach in Italian. Nobody’s going to check up on us anyway.’ And I wonder: why have foreign language teachers who possess content skills, say in history or literature for example, been left out?”

20 A complete version of the questionnaire administered is in Di Martino & Di Sabato (2012).
CLIL on a voluntary basis). Like some of the teachers who filled in our questionnaires, we then feel it is quite unproductive that they have been completely excluded from the CLIL reform whereas most of those who are now ‘forced’ to teach according to CLIL methodology do not know much about it. In this respect, it is a fact that only half of the teachers who filled in our questionnaires have shown some knowledge of CLIL and of its possible assets. Most Italian teachers are in fact over forty years old and this also means the majority of them have never really studied a foreign language in a systematic way. Indeed, the study of one language in all degree courses has only been made mandatory over the last few years. Also, the compulsory language exam in non-language degree courses often consists in what we call idoneità, that is an assessment with no final grade, which we feel is not sufficient instrumental motivation to go in much depth in the study of language. We fear the situation is not going to change much in the near future because without the motivation of affecting their final degree through the results they get in their language exams, learners only study enough to just pass: as language teachers we fear the lack of interest in our graduates’ communicative skills in a foreign language might be one of the main reasons for our country’s scarce competitiveness in a globalized scenario; and from our perspective in relation to the matter at stake, this policy is obviously no guarantee of the competence needed to teach a subject in a foreign language in the case of a teaching career.

Switching from the language to the methodological training, the answers to the question ‘What type of training would help you teach using CLIL methodology best?’ are revealing of the teachers’ concern about language competence once again: in fact, disregarding the scope of the question –i.e. our aim to gain an insight into their methodological competence and needs–, some of the teachers answered advocating ‘intensive language training’. However, it was good to find out that even teachers who have not received a specific language formation perceive the importance that the latter should not be of a once-in-while nature, but rather be conceived as a life-long form of training.

We feel it is also worth pointing out that some of the teachers seemed to be convinced that the problematic areas of CLIL can only be dealt with when the next

21 We do appreciate the choice of not discriminating against non-native teachers, instead. There is a wide literature on the topic. We will just mention here the value of strategic code-switching in CLIL as maintained by Johnson & Swain (1994) and Coonan (2002).
generation of teachers comes along, and therefore advise that specific postgraduate courses should be set up, instead of trying to fill in the many language and methodology gaps of the present class of teachers.

When questioned about the qualities teacher trainers should possess, the teachers were adamant that competent teacher trainers were the very essence of the CLIL courses success. By stressing the need for competent trainers, they seem to reveal a strong distrust of previous training experiences, as well as of the people in charge of teacher trainers recruitment, so we feel it is crucial that those who will assume responsibility for employing the teacher trainers are made aware that the latter will take on the delicate role of models. We are convinced that the success of CLIL in Italy will depend as much on the content teachers’ language skills as on the trainers’ ability to offer themselves as such: they will be looked at as pioneers (very few of previous Italian CLIL experiments have reached the public at large), and only excellent trainers will manage to convince teachers who are no longer young and trustful in the school system (as it turned out to be evident in other teacher statements in the questionnaires) that CLIL is the right way forward. The enthusiasm they will (or will not) manage to stimulate in the teachers they will train is directly proportional to the interest and curiosity the latter will succeed in rousing in their students.

The attention to the foreign language competence also re-emerged in the final part of the questionnaire, aimed at giving those who have been working in the Italian school for years and can therefore be considered to be the real ‘experts’ the possibility to give us an idea of the possible problems along with working solutions. In addition to the worries about the scarce professionality of some teachers, serious doubts were expressed about the actual possibility for teachers over a certain age to acquire a communicative competence in the foreign language which make it possible for them to teach CLIL effectively.

This is a crucial issue to develop further, because it is by now not only clear to experts in foreign language teaching that “if a language teacher’s speech is frequently marked by errors, this can seriously interfere with the quality of input provided for his or her students” (Consolo 2006: 4), but also that teachers’ language proficiency cannot be measured against what might be identified as the linguistic component, i.e. vocabulary and grammar solely: broader communicative skills such as attention to the functional component, textual competence, pragmatic knowledge, strategic skills, to
mention just a few, are of the utmost importance for successful teaching (Chastain 1989, Bachman & Palmer 1996, Briguglio & Kirkpatrick 1996). Elder actually considers the multidimensional aspect of teacher’s speech as a form of Language for Specific Purposes: it encompasses “everything that ‘normal’ language users might be expected to be able to do in the context of both formal and informal communication as well as a range of specialist skills” (Elder 2001: 152). It would therefore be interesting (indeed, precious) to transfer into CLIL research the results of current research on the language proficiency of overseas qualified teachers working in English-speaking countries (Elder 1993a, 1993b, 2001, Lumley & Brown 1996, Plakans & Abraham 1990, Viète 1998). In this respect, explicit reference from the content teachers surveyed to communicative competence rather than to generic language competence in more than one case is meaningful in terms of self-awareness. And we wonder if the authors of language syllabuses will ever take in due consideration this aspect: to refer to the CEF levels and to only recognize certification by institutions officially recognized by the countries where the foreign language is spoken is certainly a guarantee, but CLIL modules, along with future university courses, will have to focus not only on teachers’ competencies but also on teachers’ awareness of such aspects if a meaningful impact on instruction quality is actually desired. Otherwise, most of CLIL teaching might become a simple listing of equivalent words in the foreign language or a translational activity of texts.

3. Conclusions

Summing up in a very crude way (and as briefly as the space constraints allow for) the results of our survey taking into consideration the whole of the data, our research reveals serious worries on behalf of the teachers involved in the CLIL reform about the scarce professionalility of some colleagues and doubts about the actual possibility for the present teaching class (i.e. mostly teachers over a certain age) to acquire a communicative competence in the foreign language which make it possible for them to teach CLIL in a way, which be interesting and motivating for students. Moreover, a need for competent teachers trainers is also felt to be a priority.
We personally think that a transitional phase may have been devised before proper CLIL ‘revolution’, involving the foreign language teachers: many of them are already used to teaching according to CLIL methodology. Focus could have been on the next generation of teachers, instead\(^\text{22}\).

Grounding all projects on actual reality is the key to success. We are convinced that the progress of CLIL in Italy will depend on the Ministry’s ability to carry out a strict assessment of the teachers’ foreign language competence and to appoint competent teacher trainers at the same time. If, for the sake of what stated in the Gelmini school reform and of the deadlines already settled, eyes will be kept shut, any possible positive outcome will be impaired.

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\(^{22}\) The project might also have started on an experimental basis with selected teachers, for instance those who have actually studied subjects in English at University (there are some Universities which already did that in the past) or those who teach disciplines which are characterised by a highly formulaic language.

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