CLIL COURSES AND A QUALITY MANAGEMENT AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Introduction

Quality in Language Teaching (LT) has for years been a focus of attention for research and all those employed in the field, from policy makers to materials writers, teachers and stakeholders such as employers and other social players. The main beneficiary of provision, learners themselves, at school or university, have for some time been aware of issue of quality and clearly perceive the need for it. This is demonstrated by the world-wide success of international certification schemes.

CLIL can be perceived as a way to improve quality in language teaching. It not only widens the scope of how foreign languages are used for communication purposes but also fosters the implementation of higher level cognitive skills and cultural knowledge.

However, we should not overlook the fact that CLIL can also threaten the quality levels of ordinary teaching: on the one hand, quality assurance of non FL teachers’ language competence is a matter of primary importance, on the other hand, the cultural competence of FL teachers in the different subjects taught with CLIL is often a puzzle to educational systems and stakeholders.

This way of approaching CLIL is a first step towards quality in CLIL teaching, although Quality Management (QM) implies a great deal of other aspects and different approaches. This paper focuses on a set of issues that arise in relating quality management and assurance to CLIL at university level. The aim is in fact to construct a framework for analysis that will lead to the development of quality practice in CLIL at university and for teachers participating in CLIL-based courses or modules.

Unfortunately there remain several unanswerable questions. How should universities prepare for the advent of CLIL? Is CLIL even possible in Italian universities? Or as a best case hypothesis, are those rare CLIL courses destined to remain one-off experiences, while more widespread use is made of a foreign language, usually English, only as a vehicle in subject teaching?

This paper is based on several years’ work on quality in LT, published mainly in Mezzadri 2004a and Mezzadri 2005. It is also based on two years’ study of the possibility of offering CLIL courses.
at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università di Parma. If this project is implemented, which is a possibility for the future, theory will need to be carefully put into practice on the basis of schemata and frameworks from the world of quality management and assurance.

**Quality in CLIL: the European dimension**

The subject of quality in CLIL has been a topic of discussion for years in Europe. In 2002 David Marsh, one of the most important writers in the field, edited the report *CLIL / EMILE The European Dimension. Actions, Trends and Foresight Potential*1. In 2007 Marsh led a team of international experts on the CLIL Matrix "Achieving good practice in Content and Language Integrated Learning/bilingual education"2 discussed in more detail below. As we shall see, the CLIL Matrix does not provide solutions for all the didactic, organisational and management problems besetting CLIL, but nonetheless it should become a point of reference, a compass, that can help CLIL teachers everywhere to find their way.

**Quality in the Common European Framework of Reference**

Nowadays it is impossible to discuss languages in Europe without mentioning the CEFR. The Framework is well known and widely used to an extent that is surprising for many commentators. The unexpectedly rapid dissemination and influence of the CEFR was not the only element taken into account by the European Commission, but the surprise effect was so marked that the Committee of Ministers in July 2008 felt the need to indicate its importance in *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)7*, which makes recommendations for the use of the CEFR and the promotion of plurilingualism. The CEFR is also central to the debate on quality, and can in fact be considered as a sort of quality manual. Transparency and coherence are two objectives typical of quality management, and the CEFR also indicates these as objectives for education systems and LT.

Transparency is a basic aspect of quality, and in LT it implies first of all that there must be access to all information and documentation making explicit the tasks of all those involved. In the context of a CLIL module or course at university, this means more than analysing teaching actions and their effects in terms of student assessment. It means, for example, that the numbers of credits allotted to the language learning and to the subject content need to be clearly defined. Regarding communication between teacher and learner, transparency requires that the CLIL syllabus and courses of study need to be clearly stated and supplied clearly and consistently. The CLIL teacher needs to communicate to students with transparency and consistency. And where teaching is shared


between language and subject teachers, the subject teacher needs to do the same with the individual colleague or team of colleagues providing language assistance.

The project under development at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia di Parma allows for the subject teacher to either teach the CLIL course alone, or to benefit from the support of a team of language experts who prepare teaching materials for the CLIL lessons. These materials are made available for students attending the lessons and for self-learning period before the examination.

The definition of standards is another aspect which requires a high degree of transparency, and is in fact in itself an exercise in transparency. Not only language teachers but anyone in recent years who has had to do with language learning is familiar with the CEFR levels of competence A1, A2, B1, etc. This is discussed in more detail below.

The second fundamental aspect of quality management present in the CEFR is coherence, which, like transparency, tends to be problematic in Italian universities. Universities are particularly complex as education systems as they include a very high number of different aspects and processes, and the links between them are all too often few and fragmentary. The CEFR, on the other hand, is predicated on a transparent, harmonious and coherent system with all components fully integrated.

With regard to teaching processes, the CEFR states that (CEFR, pp. 7):

- coherence requires that there is a harmonious relation among their components:
  - the identification of needs;
  - the determination of objectives;
  - the definition of content;
  - the selection or creation of material;
  - the establishment of teaching/learning programmes;
  - the teaching and learning methods employed;
  - evaluation, testing and assessment.

There are other aspects of the CEFR which are similar to international standard systems of quality management such as ISO (Mezzadri 2004a: 112). Closely connected to the concepts of transparency and consistency are the awareness of processes and activities and the need for communication and documentation. Heyworth writes (Heyworth 2002: 187):
In language teaching this will mean that curricula should not only exist but that they should be made available to learners and teachers and complemented by syllabi, schemes of work, weekly plans, etc. Clear and understandable level descriptors provide a necessary framework for setting objectives and measuring progress.

For CLIL at university level, the CEFR levels provide the link to “levels defined by a particular institution or system to a rigorously drafted scale expressed in terms of real world communicative competence” (Heyworth 2002: 187). The application of CEFR levels involves informed reading and interpretation of the CEFR, and in particular close attention to the Guide for Users (Trim 2002). As research on the use of Italian as an L2 for study purposes has shown (Mezzadri 2008), the levels can be adapted or reformulated to fit specific objectives, or they can be completely re-written using the appendix of the CEFR. For CLIL at university in fact, it would probably be advisable to draw up specific levels of competence based on detailed descriptors of linguistic communicative competence in the form of can do descriptors.

There is unfortunately insufficient space to look at this possibility in detail or report on ongoing experience. But an important factor to take into account in the discussion of whether it is useful to adapt CEFR scales to CLIL is that the original targets of the CEFR are not university students following CLIL courses. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency is not usually fully introduced until learners have reached B2 level, which is inadequate when using the language for communication with lower cognitive impact, and becomes absolutely insufficient for CLIL at university level.

CLIL teaching and an interpretation of the system

It is becoming increasingly clear that CLIL involves a much wider range of players than the individual professor teaching a CLIL course or module. CLIL requires coordination and collaboration at system level, and quality management too requires that the system be seen as a whole. Italian universities, however, are not accustomed to this type of collaboration. To aim for total quality management, the university as an institution needs to redesign its structures, resources, procedures etc. The insertion of CLIL course or modules would clearly not suffice to effect fundamental change to the institution overall, which is in any case outside the realms of the present discussion. But what does appear to be an achievable aim is continuous improvement, which in fact constitutes a real state of mind, and one of the key aims, of quality management.
Continuous improvement in the quality management system
The diagram shows the mechanism of functioning of various distinct system components in processes. The organisation of CLIL provision in Italian universities clearly does not correspond to this model of management, but it is useful to consider how certain aspects could be adapted to the academic context. In our project at the Università di Parma, management functions would be carried out by a working party. Its functions would include identifying student needs, involving students in the process of change brought about by CLIL, identifying the needs CLIL can meet, resource management (the coordination of the teaching team) and evaluation of processes for assessing student satisfaction and learning.

There are, of course, complex links between the various components which the diagram does not show in detail. It shows clearly the centrality of the student or other user, the importance of an initial needs analysis, the assessment of transformation of input into output and the key role of management, but it gives little indication of the CLIL teacher’s role in the process. In real life, of course, it is the CLIL classroom teacher who is the driving force and coordinator of the various components. It is the teacher who carries out resource management, management decisions or at least the implementation of management decisions, as well as assessment, analysis and measurement of input and output.

For effective CLIL, however, there is a requirement for more than the teacher acting as the sole key figure. The collaboration of teaching and non-teaching staff is essential for successful implementation of the teaching-learning process.

**A model of processes**

There is in the world of QM a model which constitutes a standard of functioning for all players and professional roles involved and which can be usefully applied to CLIL. This model is the so-called Deming cycle or PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act). The cycle could be applied to university CLIL as follows.

- **Plan**: analyse processes in the CLIL course or module, acquire firsthand knowledge of them and compare them to user requirements or in this case student needs;
- **Do**: activate processes which provide the service (teaching);
- **Check**: constant monitoring of process in relation to declared objectives;
- **Act**: correct where necessary in order to make continuous improvement to the service.
The model has clear similarities with the model usually found in language learning and teaching units and modules, where needs analyses take place before teaching in the planning of the unit or module. The unit or module is then put into practice through a series of different phases of activities, leading up to a test of learning and lastly, where necessary, error correction and remedial activities.

There is thus nothing particularly new for the CLIL teacher, who by definition is a highly specialised professional offering various skills including language teaching. What makes the model particularly interesting and innovative is that it reveals the need for all components to work constantly in harmony with one another. There needs to be a firm hand on the tiller.

**A practical response: CLIL Matrix**

The CLIL project Matrix "Achieving good practice in Content and Language Integrated Learning/bilingual education" drew up a model based on four basic components: content, language, integration and learning. These are realized through four different parameters: Culture, Communication, Cognition and Community. They are divided into sixteen indicators which the authors claim can be used to ensure quality in CLIL in both language and content.

The matrix provides a checklist for each indicator, which is intended to guide the teacher in a process of continuous improvement in class teaching. For instance, the indicator of the link between language and cognition reads

Subject learning requires handling cognitive load. In quality CLIL care is taken to support and guide learners in concept-building in the target language.
This is followed by exemplification, which for the Language-Cognition indicator reads:

The way content and language learning can integrate becomes very clear when looking at language and cognition. Cognitive concepts are represented through linguistic signs (words or phrases), and learners have to grasp the relationship between the linguistic sign and the cognitive concept. In content subjects many concepts are usually structured in a much more precise way than in everyday subject matter. So concept-building is in a way both easier and more difficult than in everyday contexts. It is easier because concepts are very clearly defined (e.g. "time" is a clear concept for a historian or a physicist). It is more difficult because concepts are more complex and carry a high cognitive load (e.g. "time" is difficult to define as a concept because it includes a high amount of cognitive categories). So when learners come across, let us say the concept of "time" they have to understand that as a scientific concept it is different from its everyday use. This is, of course, fairly difficult and learners need a lot of guidance.

All this is then translated into a set of specific statements. For the Language-Cognition indicator, statements aiming to identify behaviour leading to quality in CLIL teaching are:

1. I check students understanding of the differences between scientific and everyday meaning of concepts.
2. I provide structured guidance.
3. I use different forms of learning to develop cognition.
4. My students carry out experiments to acquire insights.
5. I specifically focus on concept building in the target language.
6. My understanding of how the learners think and problem-solve is ________.

Answers are given on a five-point scale, which for the first statement runs: very often, often, sometimes, not often, never.

The last step in the matrix is assessment of the teacher’s level, to reveal areas where improvement is desirable and which is carried out by means of a simple graph.

This brief extract summarises the meaning of the Language-Cognition statements:

Learning to understand scientific concepts should be an important part of CLIL methodology. Learners should constantly be made aware of the meaning a scientific concept carries and be able to compare scientific concepts with everyday concepts.
Rather than being an aim in itself, we believe that the Matrix is today the only possible starting point for CLIL teaching at any level. It does not however cover all aspects of Quality Management in CLIL, and the next sections examines a particularly central aspect.

**Using a foreign language as a vehicle or CLIL**

In a recent paper, Coonan (Coonan 2004: 41-42) puts forward a distinction between using a foreign language as a vehicle and CLIL:

> In one type of in L2 vehicular learning the foreign language is used simply as a vehicle. CLIL, on the other hand, emphasises the pedagogical features of the vehicular dimension. This has important implications for methodology and didactics. Not all courses taught in a vehicular language are CLIL; because they lack its distinctive methodological features. [Translation ours]

Coonan is discussing teachers in schools, but we believe her observations are relevant to CLIL teachers in universities too. She goes on to say (Coonan 2004: 43):

> fail to understand the complexity of the issue and may thus not be aware of a series of facts, aspects, conditions and needs brought to the fore by an efficacious use of L2 as vehicle. It is thus clear that teaching a subject or content is not simply a question of changing the language. [Translation ours]

Coonan’s inevitable conclusion (Coonan 2004: 43), with which we agree, is that “the CLIL teacher is not simply a subject teacher who also has LT skills.” Let us now examine the profile of a successful CLIL teacher.

**The CLIL teacher’s professional skills**

In the same paper, Coonan (pp. 43-44) identifies areas of responsibility of the quality CLIL teacher and writes:

> The CLIL teacher needs specific training for the new teaching and learning environment. Required areas of expertise include language, linguistics, LT methodology, subject teaching methodology, as well as knowledge and awareness of issues such as bilingualism, second language acquisition, and bilingual and multilingual education. [Translation ours]

Moreover, certain skills are specific to CLIL teaching, for example the ability to plan a course syllabus individually or in a team of LT or subject colleagues. The ability to prepare teaching materials which make CLIL materials accessible to learners is also very important. The integration
of learning of language and content underlies the whole process going from needs analysis, the use of materials right up to the assessment of learning. The CLIL teacher must be able to understand and relate to different elements in the system consistently and efficaciously, applying procedures that are in line with QM. The teacher needs to be able to adopt a frame of mind and way of working outlined in the CLIL Matrix, and so on and so forth.

**Widening the scope of the CLIL Matrix**

This section of the paper extends the discussion to areas outside or partly outside the CLIL Matrix, and presents a model of accreditation for teachers and schools first put forward in Mezzadri 2005, which is used as the basis for the project *ITALS Qualità* at the Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia.

Here too we examine only CLIL courses themselves, and for reasons of space leave aside other aspects of quality involved in CLIL such as: in-service teacher training, relationship between teachers and those responsible for publicising CLIL and the quality of this communication; the role of management, classrooms and equipment etc., attention to the learner and monitoring of learning and learning support, evaluation of student satisfaction in all phases in the process: needs analysis, teaching, self-learning and testing. Another important aspect for universities for which there is unfortunately no space would be the form of exam results and their ability to reflect the worth of the CLIL course and the possible modification of the courses.

We can base a further investigation into the matter on a checklist adapted from *ITALS Qualità* similar to those in the CLIL Matrix. These allow the teacher to assess her own CLIL courses and provide for monitoring and assessment by other professional figures such as course directors.

It is of course likely that an Italian university teacher considering the adoption of CLIL may be inhibited by the sheer number of questions, and that these are so detailed that they may act as a barrier to further consideration of the idea. But awareness is very important in the world of QM, and obliges the widest possible approach to the issue.

So possible questions are:

- Are courses benchmarked with other existing courses and institutions?
- Does course design take into account needs expressed by users?
- Does course design take into account documents such as the CEFR?
- Do staff and users have access to course information?
- Is course information clear and complete?
• Do users receive support in their choice of course?
• Are courses based on CLIL methodological principles recognised by staff and users?
• Do courses meet user needs efficaciously?
• Do the courses aim to develop language communication competence and subject content in balanced way?
• Do courses aim to develop consistently general competences? (Declarative knowledge (savoir) existential competence (savoir être) skill and know-how (savoir faire) the ability to learn (savoir apprendre))
• Is management and overall organisation efficacious?
• Is there continuous monitoring, assessment and improvement of courses by the institution?
• Is teaching material and equipment consistent with the syllabus, suitable for students and suitable for the objectives of the CLIL course?
• Is there the right number of students per class?
• Is there a head coordinator or director in charge of CLIL teaching?
• Does the head of CLIL supervise the work of teachers through regular classroom observation, interviews or other forms of direct contact?
• Does the head of CLIL supervise and assess the work of teachers through written documents (class registers, reports, student satisfaction surveys)?
• Do teachers plan their lessons for CLIL to take place efficaciously?
• Do teachers collaborate in sharing materials with colleagues?
• Are meetings on teaching held regularly between teachers and coordinators?
• Is the methodology of each individual teacher consistent with the CLIL project, course planning and teaching materials?
• Do teachers have adequate knowledge of the language(s) and subject(s) taught?
• Do teachers have an adequate knowledge of LT principles and the ability to put them into practice?
• Do teachers show adequate ability in classroom management?
• Do teachers show adequate ability to relate to the learners as individuals?
• Do teachers show an adequate ability to communicate subject content in the vehicle language?
• Do teachers show an adequate ability in monitoring, testing and assessing learning processes and providing opportunities for remedial work?
• Do teachers show an adequate ability for self assessment and improvement of performance?
• Do teachers show an adequate capacity to provide a motivating atmosphere for their learners in class?
• Do teachers show an adequate ability to put the learner at the centre of the learning process?
• Do teachers show an adequate capacity to create an atmosphere of participation and collaboration in class?
• Do teachers show an adequate ability to use new technology in CLIL teaching?

Conclusions
There is an enormous distance between real and the ideal world, at least in Italy. But the size of the task is no reason for discouragement; the attempt to introduce elements of quality into university teaching in itself constitutes a positive move, especially in the current political and economic climate.

To summarise, it is far from easy to set up the conditions for quality CLIL teaching. Teachers working alone or in tandem with a colleague or colleagues need to widen their field of action to take account of many more issues than normally arise in university teaching in Italy. In the same way, the institution itself is required to re-think its organisation and functioning on multiple levels. If all this does not occur, the attempt to put into practice CLIL will at best lead to teaching subjects through a vehicle foreign language.

References


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