

TESOL Italy's 38th National Convention: Englishing

Extensive Reading and CLIL

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The talk aims to illustrate the initial phases of a CLIL-methodology experience carried out in a third-year class (3^A) of a “liceo linguistico” (in school year 2012-2013), as well as the subsequent continuation of the project into the first term of school-year 2013-2014 in the same class (4^A).

The initiative, called “ReadOn for e-CLIL”, is a pilot project promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education in collaboration with the British Council, the British Embassy and Oxford University Press; it was started in January 2013 with a view to introducing CLIL methodology at high-school level through “extensive reading”. Several schools from all over Italy have been taking part in the initiative, for which several teacher-training sessions have been organized in Rome this year. Furthermore, the trainees are also required to attend a number of webinars, which are held on a regular basis.

“Liceo scientifico e linguistico Bérard”, which is located in Aosta (north-west of Italy) and only 40 km away from the French border, is one of the schools involved in “ReadOn for e-CLIL”.

“Liceo Bérard” has two separate branches, the “scientifico” and the “linguistico” sections. The figures below show the situation in the present school year (2013-2014).

Liceo scientifico students: 438

Liceo linguistico students: 276

Overall number of teachers: 80

With reference to the geographical area, it is convenient to point out that all the pupils in the schools of the region (Aosta Valley) study French as L2 from a very early age (nursery school), whereas English is considered as L3.

1. PROJECT PHASES

1.1 School year 2012-2013

At the beginning of the experience (end of January 2013), the class involved consisted of 18 students (15 girls and 3 boys).

They were all invited to become members of an “extensive reading” group. To help them improve their language skills, the class was thus offered a “blended” library (consisting of a “mobile” and an “online” library of “graded readers”).

The “mobile library” arrived at school at the end of March 2013; it consists of over 60 books, among which several classics of English and international literature, biographies, essays and short stories. The ScuolaBook software, which was uploaded at a later date, consists of nine books (mainly “graded” novels).

Soon after the arrival of the “mobile library”, the students were encouraged to appoint a “class librarian” and to devise an efficient book-loan system.

On the other hand, the whole group of students was administered a ready-made baseline test (devised by the project organizers) and aimed at establishing the initial level of English of each individual student.

At the end of the school year, a final evaluation test was administered to assess the students’ reading progress. Nevertheless, in consideration of the limited period of the students’ exposure to the books (approximately two months), as well of the period of the school year (second term, with a huge amount of end-of-year assignments), the results of the final test were unfortunately not very different from the baseline activity.

1.2 School year 2013-2014

Since at the end of school year 2012 – 2013 six students out of eighteen failed, at present the class is slightly different from last year. The total number of students is now 19 (15 girls and 4 boys) and the current fourth-year class is the result of the merging of two different groups of third-year students. (3A & 3B).

2. PROJECT RATIONALE

2.1 ER Principles

The extensive reading approach is based on the idea that *"People learn to read, and to read better, by reading"* (Eskey), as well as on Krashen's assumption that *"reading vast amounts of materials may foster competence in the foreign language"*.

The primary goal of the project is, therefore, a "linguistic" one, considering that it promotes English language proficiency through reading.

The criteria which lie behind the rationale of the project are based on few, very simple, key ideas, as follows:

1) **Graded readers:** The books included in the library range from level 1 (Elementary) to level 6 (Upper Intermediate/Advanced). Therefore the students may choose the level which is most suitable to their needs and knowledge. This is also in line with Krashen's idea of the "Input + 1" hypothesis, according to which language learning is best fulfilled when: 1) the message is understandable to the learner (i) and 2) the comprehensible input is one step beyond the student's language ability. Also, since it is based on the actual student's knowledge (the book should be neither too difficult, nor too easy, as well as being "challenging" for the learner, considering that it should be beyond his/her level), this approach makes the reader "motivated" and willing to build his language skills.

2) **Reading for pleasure:** The students choose their own books from the library freely, which activates an "affective filter". This means that they choose their own book(s) based on "positive feelings" and "curiosity" and they keep reading the chosen text precisely because they want to know how the story ends.

3) **Reading with no pressure:** Reading is supposed to be a stress-free experience, since no test is envisaged at the end of individual books.

4) **Reading at one's own pace:** The students are allowed to take their books home, since the "mobile" library works as an ordinary library: they borrow the books, take the responsibility for the conditions of the book and "pay" in case of damage.

In some cases, the books can also be used in the classroom as "gap fillers", since the teacher may ask the pupils to read their books on a number of occasions (i.e. while other classmates are being tested, while waiting for others to complete some tasks etc.).

At other times the teacher may organize 10/15- minute USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) sessions at the end of his/her teaching module; both the students and the teacher will thus be involved in this "group" experience, which also functions as a "cohesive" activity.

From a language-building point of view, the mentioned principles contribute to achieving a number of positive consequences, since regular "reading for the sake of reading" allows language learners:

- to learn huge amounts of words without realizing they "are" learning,
- To become used to specific grammar and syntax that they can hopefully re-use at the moment of their own writing.
- To be exposed to a wide range of literary genres.

Furthermore, some extra-linguistic benefits are also expected to arise from the experience, as follows:

- improvement of the pupils' concentration span,
- acquisition of a life-long desire for books

2.2 Extensive Reading vs. Intensive Reading

It is convenient to point out that ER is seldom used in our schools, since in most cases pupils are asked to read intensively. Traditionally speaking, teachers introduce a (literary) topic and subsequently focus on extracts from individual texts, about which students are usually asked to "understand", "summarize", detect "figures of speech" and study the unknown words.

Therefore, Intensive Reading is based on an inductive way of reasoning (from specific to general), whereas Extensive Reading is based on a deductive approach (from general to specific).

The table below illustrates the main differences between the two reading styles:

INTENSIVE READING	EXTENSIVE READING
1) “text-based”	A) “genre- based”
2) The student reads a text	B) The student reads vast amounts of books
3) The student is asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “understand” • Study vocabulary • Detect figures of speech 	C) The student “reads for the sake of reading”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning occurs indirectly
4) Text: object of teacher’s assessment	D) Indirect, long-term evaluation

2.3 ER Teacher Profile

The extensive reading methodology also entails the need for a new role on the part of the teacher. In contrast with the traditional approach, in which the teacher acts as a decision-maker and a “judge”, in an ER context s/he is supposed to be a “facilitator” who helps the students make their own personal choices, as well as a “fellow reader and learner”.

Therefore, as emphasized by Nina Prentice, “*ER teachers are passionate volunteers who believe in the transformative power of stories and reading*” and who do not “*feel threatened by freedom of choice of the students*”.

3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: DETECTION OF CLIL SUBJECTS

A number of activities have been proposed so far in order to push the students to detect CLIL themes starting from “familiar” books. Some of them are illustrated below.

3.1 School year 2012-2013

After one month from the beginning of the reading experience, in the month of April 2013, the pupils were encouraged to bring their books to school and to give their opinions about them. By way of example, they were asked the following:

- 1) What did you like best about your book?
- 2) Illustrate an episode in the book that was particularly interesting.
- 3) Give at least two good reasons for reading “your” book.

After their “interview”, each student left his book on the desk for his/her classmates to see and choose. A class analysis of book titles and of book covers followed, during which ideas concerning potential “CLIL” topics were elicited from the students according to a “blue-sky thinking” approach.

By way of example, among the books there were some thrillers and horror stories (“*Tales of mystery and Imagination*” and others) which allowed the English teacher to introduce the “Gothic novel” (i.e. fear, the supernatural element) and “Gothic architecture”.

In collaboration with the Art teacher, the students were given some materials about the most important examples of Gothic architecture in Europe and in England.

To familiarize them with the main features and the most important “places” of Gothic architecture, some comprehension exercises were prepared about a number of reading texts.

At a later stage, they were required to work in four groups and look for information about examples of Gothic architecture in some Northern European countries (King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, Lincoln Cathedral, Milan Cathedral, Notre-Dame de Paris); last, but not least, the pupils were also encouraged to compare the mentioned buildings through the following tasks:

- 1) In your group compare and contrast at least two of the above Gothic monuments.
- 2) Detect common features of Gothic monuments across some European countries.

The mentioned activity was also an opportunity to familiarize them with the existence of “ESPs”; through *ad hoc* vocabulary exercises, they learned that each scientific subject has its own epistemological rules and that “art” has its own specific language

They were then encouraged to compile their own “Art glossary”.

3.2 School year 2013-2014

A) Activity 1

At the beginning of the school year the students were invited to write a “review” or “trailer” of some of the books they had read during the summer holidays, as well as a description of the main characters in the book(s).

The students’ reporting activities were an opportunity for the English teacher to introduce the main features of the most important literary genres (poetry, prose, drama), as well as the differences across sub-genres (i.e. Why is a novel different from a short story?).

With specific reference to the genre of “prose”, the students were also made aware of the most significant sub-genres (novels, short stories, essays, biographies, etc.) and, more specifically, of the features of the novel (Plot, Place Setting, Time setting, Narrator, Point of view, Theme)

As for the characters, the students were made aware of the difference between “flat vs. round” characters through an interesting comparison between bi-dimensional and 3D works of art they were already familiar with.

On one hand, the mosaics of *S. Apollinare in Classe* and *S. Apollinare Nuovo* – which are typical examples of Byzantine art, with hieratic posture and no “individual” traits - were used to illustrate the main features of “flat” characters in the novel.

On the other hand, in order to show the potential for “psychological development” and “personal growth” of round characters in famous novels, they were shown some statues dating back to the Greek civilization period. Examples illustrated were the works by Skopas (the Dancing Maenad), Praxitaeles and Lysipos; as a matter of fact, these statues reflect a realistic approach and are depicted in a naturalistic way, with an emphasis on expressions of energy and power. Moreover, in most cases the twist of the statues’ bodies conveys an idea of movement and dynamism, which can be easily correlated with the round characters of most novels.

They were then invited to look for some information in English about the above mosaics and individual statues by the mentioned sculptors. They were allowed to use both paper and internet material.

In particular, each student was given several tasks, as follows:

Task 1 and 2: Detecting flat and round characters

1) Flat Characters

- Look for some info about the mosaics which can be found in “Sant’Apollinare Nuovo” and “Sant’Apollinare in Classe”.
- Describe the main characteristics of the people painted in the mosaics and find key-words to describe them.
- Compare them with specific flat characters that you have come across in your book(s).

2) Round Characters

- Look for some info about the statues by one of the following sculptors (Skopas, Praxitaeles and Lysipos);
- Describe the main characteristics of the statues, with specific reference to the movement of their bodies and find key-words to describe them.
- Try to draw a correlation between some of the mentioned statues and specific round characters that you have come across in your book(s).

Task 3: Comparing flat and round characters

- Compare “flat characters” in some of your books with flat characters from your classmates’ books. Decide why they are flat.
- Compare some round characters in your books with other round characters from your classmates’ books. Illustrate specific situations which make them “round”.

At the end of the activity the students were administered the end-of-module test below:

End-of-module test:

With reference to one of the books from the “mobile” library, write a profile of a round character and contrast it with a “flat” one. Give evidence for your choice.

B) Activity 2

Considering that some of the students had read some Renaissance tragedies and comedies during the summer (*Romeo & Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), the teacher of English stimulated a class discussion about "the genre of drama and the birth of the first permanent theatres in Elizabethan England".

They were then given some materials about the importance of Renaissance drama as a "full scale social phenomenon" and the "layout of Elizabethan theatres" (i.e. "The Theatre"- J. Burbage); in particular, in order to get them to compare various kinds of theatres built in the same period in different countries, they were provided with some materials about "The Globe" (London) and "Teatro Olimpico" by Andrea Palladio (Vicenza).

As far as the latter is concerned, a video was downloaded from the Internet and used for a listening comprehension activity (with T/F comprehension exercises + vocabulary study).

At present the students are working on the following homework task:

- A) Which are the main differences in layout between the "Globe Theatre" (Elizabethan theatre) and "Teatro Olimpico" (classical theatre)?
- B) Look for some information about:
 - 1) The social class/es of the people who attended playhouses in England in the Renaissance
 - 2) The social class/es of the people who attended "Teatro Olimpico" in Italy
 - 3) Based on your research, decide whether the different layouts of the two theatres are somewhat related to practical needs and/or the target audience.

C) Activity 3

It is convenient to point out that the books included in the mobile library can be used as a precious teaching resource, since the teacher might want to use them as materials for reading and/or listening comprehension, In our case, this year some parts of the book "Leonardo da Vinci" have been used with the aim of improving the students' listening skills.

4. RATIONALE BEHIND CLASS ACTIVITIES

4.1 Aiming at H.O.T.S. and C.A.L.P.

All tasks assigned aim at developing "higher order thinking skills"(H.O.T.S), in line with Bloom's taxonomy. As a matter of fact, "comparing" and "contrasting", as well as "classifying" and "detecting" specific elements (see activity for school year 2012-2013 and Activities 1 & 2 for school year 2013-2014) are cognitive operations which contribute to the development of high-level reasoning skills on the part of the learners.

Likewise, comparing, contrasting and classifying are also instrumental to the achievement of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, (Cummins), which should be one of main the goals in a CLIL class.

5. CONCLUSIONS:

The extensive reading project has proved to be an extremely motivating methodological approach , since:

- it creates group cohesion;
- it fosters imagination and creativity both on the part of the students and of the teacher;
- it is a great opportunity to get the students to speak, to share experiences, to create ideas.
- It is an interesting tool which can be used to elicit CLIL ideas from the students.

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