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Can CLIL give Italian high school students in the private sector a greater opportunity to develop their EFL speaking skills?

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) can lead Italian high school students to improve their English as a Foreign Language speaking skills. The trigger for this research comes from my EFL teaching experiences at Italian schools, where the syllabi employed tend to neglect the training of speaking skills and focus mainly on grammar translation and English literature instructions. The stimulus for this investigation comes also from articles on the effectiveness of using CLIL for the improvement of FL speaking performance and Lexis extension that I read before writing this article in order to have a broader view of this topic. The literature review describes in detail theoretical issues with regard to the advantages of using CLIL methodology in the classroom over traditional approaches and how this technique helps FL students to facilitate speaking difficulties. It also makes reference to a few key findings from previous research. This study was conducted in Italy, and the data gathering processes consist mainly of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with five participants (three EFL learners and two experienced teachers of English as a foreign language), interview transcripts, and content analysis techniques that I used to examine and interpret the collected data. Findings indicate that not only can content and language integrated learning represent an improvement of the common EFL teaching methods and help learners enhance their speaking abilities, but it can also stimulate their motivation to study English and lower learners' levels of anxiety, which is commonly associated with their concern about making mistakes or being assessed.

Keywords: CLIL; EFL; SLA; methodology; syllabus; curriculum; grammar translation; exposure

1. Introduction

Today, English is regarded as 'the lingua Franca' and recognized as the international language of global communication throughout the world [1–3]. It is indeed the language of business, diplomacy, science, and technology and a key element for economic development [4]. In the past, in comparison to other countries in Europe, the spread of the English language in Italy was slower. However, in the last few years, the situation improved as the emerging importance of English led to prioritizing its study in Italy as a foreign language, starting from elementary schools onwards [5]. In addition, the advancement of the media and the internet has given more chances to EFL learners to have greater exposure to authentic English texts and to easily communicate in English with people from foreign countries. Lately, content and language-integrated learning programs have started to be introduced in the Italian state and private sectors, particularly in high schools [6].

1.1. Situation analysis of context

The teaching context that I chose to focus on in this essay is the Italian private high school where I worked in the past. All of the classes at this institute are mono-national, attended only by Italian students. Even though these learners have been studying English since primary school, they have mixed levels that range from low intermediate to upper intermediate (the CEFR levels are from A2 to C1). However, the majority of these students have more developed reading skills compared to their speaking abilities, and this is mainly due to the fact that this institute does not require entry and final English language speaking tests. Also, there is not much English being spoken in the classroom, and there is not much opportunity to speak it outside of school [7]. The model that is normally taught in this teaching context is based on the traditional Italian syllabus, which focuses on English grammar instruction in the first two years and on English literature in the last three years of the course. The textbooks used are anachronistic as they focus primarily on British English culture and literature and are not designed to train communicative abilities as they do not include speaking activities [8]. They are commonly used as syllabi, establishing the teaching method and the learning objectives [4]. The lessons based on conventional grammar and translation practice focus primarily on the translation of Italian sentences into English and vice versa. Through this technique, students generally learn English grammar rules deductively by rote [9] and then practice them by doing grammar exercises and translations of texts and sentences from and towards English. This method does not usually include any speaking and listening practice and dedicates very little attention to pronunciation and other communicative aspects and features of the L2.

The main objectives of grammar translation instruction are to enhance the learners' writing and reading skills to a level in which they are able to read passages of English literature and write correctly in English personal compositions, responses, and essays about literature [9].

As this teaching approach neglects the training of speaking and listening skills, it seems to be rather ineffective for EFL learners because, after many years of English study done at school and despite their good mastery of grammar and vocabulary, students are still not able to speak this language effectively and fluently [7]. This suggests that Italian learners lack adequate useful knowledge of the English language that could satisfy their communicative needs [10]. Apart from the conventional kind of school curriculum used, this problem could also be the consequence of inadequate Italian EFL teachers' preparation, as they are generally trained to do this profession rather late, almost towards the end of their study careers [5]. In other words, prospective teachers who study foreign languages at Italian universities generally study EFL grammar and literature either in undergraduate or postgraduate courses, as the set of lectures does not include modules or exams that focus on pedagogical practices. Besides, since the recruitment system is constantly changing in Italy, especially with regard to teacher training courses not always being compulsory, depending on the latest school reform of the present government that holds office, it can happen that many FL graduates become teachers without having done specific training courses. Moreover, the situation is often exacerbated by the fact that TEFL or CELTA/DELTA certificates are not mandatory for EFL teachers at public and private

Italian schools. The result is that they do not have sufficient preparation and experience to teach Italian students how to speak English correctly and fluently and what methods or media to use. To make matters worse in Italy, teachers commonly stay in the posts for a long time and do not engage in continuing professional development (CPD) [11].

1.2. Aims and objectives

First and foremost, instead of relying mainly on standard and conservative teaching methods, my aim is to investigate whether designing a contemporary and effective syllabus that focuses on CLIL methodology and meaningful interactive communication in English could be a solution to this problem and could lead Italian learners to develop better speaking skills. In this essay, I am first presenting a literature view, which includes the definition of the speaking skill and an analysis of the problems that Italian learners may encounter in acquiring this skill when learning English as a foreign language. I also provide details of the CLIL methodology, including existing key research in this area. In the literature review, I am discussing these identified learners' needs by pinpointing key contextual factors that are relevant. I am showing what the drawback is with regard to ELT in the context considered and in what way the CLIL methodology could be the solution to address this problem. The final section of this paper is based on the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

1.3. Defining the speaking skill

In the following three sections, I aim to explain and clarify to the reader what the speaking skill is, what are the linguistic obstacles that could hinder these identified learners' development of their oral communication skills, and how this skill could be acquired with CLIL practice.

Speaking is regarded as a means that allows individuals to communicate with each other in order to express their viewpoints and exchange and share opinions and thoughts. Nunan [12] and Burkart and Sheppard [13] sustain that success in FL learning can be measured, taking into consideration the learners' abilities to make a conversation in the TL. This suggests that learners should prioritize the development of speaking skills when studying a foreign language [14]. In addition, one of the main requirements of speaking is that learners need to understand how, why, and when they have to use the language'sociolinguistic competence' [15].

Florez [14] highlights a range of abilities and knowledge that learners need to have in order to acquire effective communicative competence (CC) and succeed in speaking performance. These abilities refer mostly to the correct use of grammar structures and lexis and to the assessment of the target audience's characteristics. According to Florez [14], other skills and knowledge needed to acquire a successful CC include, firstly, the use of an appropriate vocabulary that has to be comprehensible for the interlocutors, and secondly, the use of suitable and effective speaking strategies that could facilitate and increase comprehension. These strategies consist of the ability to rephrase, emphasize, and repeat the keywords and to frequently check the interlocutor's understanding. Finally, Florez [14] sustains that in order to get a successful CC and enhance the listener's participation and comprehension, speakers

of the L2 need to concentrate on the interaction and adjust the elements of speech, such as the difficulty of grammar structures used, vocabulary, and speech rate.

Speaking is generally the language skill that is most frequently used [16]. Rivers [17] maintains that in our interactions, we use speaking twice as much as writing and reading. Unlike listening and reading, which are considered 'receptive abilities', speaking has normally been likened to writing, both of which are regarded as 'productive abilities'. Speaking is also closely connected to listening as two related means of communication: each speaker concurrently is a listener, and at the same time, each listener can be a prospective speaker [3,18]. Due to the limits of the working memory, speaking occurs in conditions of limited processing faculties; therefore, the necessity for automation or routinization emerges in each area of production. This means that speakers should elaborate on the information the instant that they listen to it in real-time. Moreover, speaking entails a kind of monitoring that occurs during and after the speech output and the ability to cope with communication under a set of external pressures [3,14].

1.4. Obstacles to the development of the speaking skills

The main problems that Italian students experience when learning to speak English are due mainly to English pronunciation and the study of phonetic mix and interference from the Italian language, both spoken and written [19]. The written form of English is one of the main difficulties that Italian EFL students experience. This is because, unlike Italian, which is written and spoken as it is heard, the English language has different phonetic pronunciations and combinations that can be difficult to understand by the untrained Italian ear. In other words, while in the Italian language every sound is pronounced, in the English language there may be silent letters or combined consonants that do not necessarily sound the way they are written [19].

In addition, learners tend to suffer from a lack of confidence; it seems that the majority of Italian students do not feel comfortable in their first attempts to speak the target language [19]. The Italian students that I have identified for this study experience failings in their speaking performance, and, as I mentioned in the introduction, this may be attributable to the predominant teaching method used at their school, which overlooks speaking practice. Learners, in fact, when asked some display questions by the EFL teacher, are hardly ever demanded to give complex and well-structured answers in English. ELT methods commonly employed in the private sector rarely provide students with intelligible instruction about speaking and a thorough explanation of how English native speakers actually talk [20]. Hence, the speaking skill still continues to be for many students a far-fetched target hard to achieve [16]. The main causes of this situation in the context that I have identified, apart from the type of syllabus employed, can also depend on the assessment system used, which focuses primarily on writing and reading skills, overlooking speaking and listening comprehension abilities [21]. Consequently, due to time and curriculum constraints, the students are not offered enough opportunities to practice and train their EFL speaking skills in class.

1.5. Helpful instruction that could enhance the speaking skill

Taking account of the existing literature that defines speaking as a multi-faceted cognitive process and as a complex ability, it is important and helpful to think about successful instructions that could help FL learners acquire these processes and skills.

Oprandy [18] and Nunan maintain that good instruction could make the acquisition of speaking skills easier. Speaking instruction is crucial because it can help FL learners improve their ability to talk naturally and spontaneously in the target language with native speakers. If appropriate speaking activities are done in class, speaking can also increase motivation in learners and transform the learning environment into a dynamic and enjoyable place [22].

Moreover, speaking can encourage the development of other language skills [16]. Some researchers maintain that oral communication is a significant element in shaping the FL student's developing language [23]. Further research has in fact demonstrated that improving FL speaking competence can facilitate the enhancement of reading skills [24], the strengthening of listening comprehension [15], and the improvement of writing as well [25].

So far, very little attention has been dedicated to the instruction of communicative abilities in class, and many EFL teachers still continue to prioritize the training of writing and reading skills, overlooking almost completely the speaking practice [15]. As discussed above, the result is that the majority of EFL learners have poor command of the needed speaking skills, which should be strengthened in the secondary stage [16].

Consequently, some research was done in order to explore which could be the most appropriate approach to teaching speaking in the EFL classroom, and a broad survey of contrasting methods to teach EFL speaking sustains that CLIL could be a revolution in CLT [26,27]. Hence, the key dilemma of this paper is to investigate whether and how Italian secondary students could develop the necessary EFL speaking skills through the use of this new methodology.

2. CLIL methodology: A new challenge for FL students

This acronym was used for the first time in 1994 by Anne Maljers and David Marsh, and it stands for "Content and Language Integrated Learning". In other words, it refers to the teaching of a school subject such as art, science, history, and so on in a foreign language, usually English, French, and Spanish [28].

The advantage of this methodology, and what makes it so inviting and tempting in present FL pedagogy, is that the content has a communicative aim as it is expected to encourage the use of the target language. Hence, CLIL can be regarded as the latest step forward in communicative language teaching [29], since this methodology joins together CLT [30] and task-based learning [1]. The strong view on the advantages of CLIL seems to be that both the content capabilities and the foreign language skills enhance more effectively and efficiently when they are together [31].

In the last fifteen years, CLIL seems to have become one of the major curriculum trends in the whole of Europe [32]. As stated above, the key principle of this approach is that curricular school subjects (either scientific or humanistic) are taught in L2;

therefore, this methodology can be adapted to a broad range of activities in various learning environments with different groups of students [33].

In accordance with Genesee and Hamayan [34], additional-language teaching is more productive when it is supplemented with content instruction. This idea refers to the added value given to meaning-making in the L2 lesson when the aim of the learning is not only the foreign language but also the specific content subjects delivered by means of the L2 as a medium of instruction.

The benefit of some content-based (immersion) projects and CLIL in particular is that learners are offered two things at the price of just one [35]. CLIL methodology gives both students and teachers a greater occasion to study new things in an original manner, to understand the importance of sharing knowledge, abilities, and activities, and to organize a relaxing environment that can best motivate students in FL learning [36].

CLIL in Italian high schools

The School Reform Law (L.107/2015) passed by the Italian government introduced CLIL programs in the Italian education system, which have been strongly recommended for high schools, particularly for foreign languages and technical institutes [37]. This Reform Law distinctly emphasizes the value of CLIL methodology in schools and keenly exhorts them to foster activities that aim to enhance English-speaking learning [37]. In Italy, CLIL projects were initially proposed by Gelmini (the ex-Minister for Education) and gave particular attention to CLIL integration in '*Licei linguistici*', which are the Italian high schools that specialize in foreign languages and literatures [38]. As mentioned above, the CLIL methodology can represent an improvement of the common EFL teaching methods employed in formal education, and it can be better than other alternative approaches that aim to improve current deficit situations in English-speaking development [31].

Only recently has CLIL started to be introduced in formal school curricula, and it represents, first of all, a big challenge for foreign language teachers and subject teachers as well. However, in Italy, only a few schools have actually started to teach CLIL, as this approach is still in a phase of experimentation. This fact may be mainly attributable to a shortage of skilled teachers prepared to teach it and to the insufficiency of resources for the schools [39]. Today, ELT methods with regard to speaking employed in the Italian private sector need changes. The design of a more contemporary syllabus based on more learner-centred activities and less traditional teacher-led lessons, which mainly focus on contents, could improve the present situation and meet the needs of these identified Italian learners. Hence, CLIL could prove to be an effective change agent because, thanks to this methodology, teachers could offer better instructions to their students as they would have the opportunity to experiment with up-to-date practices and approaches, enhance their English proficiency levels, and improve classroom management.

3. Discussion

CLIL is, in reality, a flexible methodology that could have both advantages and disadvantages. It is a difficult and demanding project that runs the risk of

malfunctioning. The type of learning materials used can be crucial and significantly affect FL learners' attitudes and approaches towards this technique. Taking into consideration the teaching context analyzed and the dilemma that I identified in this study, first of all, in order to address the needs of this type of learner, it would be very helpful to explore which school subjects could be more suitable and easily adapted to a successful CLIL implementation in order to train and enhance the EFL speaking skill. Some research on CLIL pedagogy, on the one hand, suggests that in order to develop EFL learners' speaking skills, scientific and technical subjects could be more suitable for CLIL projects compared to humanities [40]. Costa [6] suggests that, although humane studies may seem to be better suited for this type of approach because their use of the language is more active and extensive in class, they are generally not recommended for CLIL methodology because they are characterized by a very complex and specific lexicon. Smit [41], on the other hand, contradicts this hypothesis and maintains that technical and scientific topics leave less space for communication and peer interaction as the teacher plays the leading role of the subject expert. These assumptions suggest that this analysis still deserves careful attention; therefore, further research and experimentation are needed to determine which types of school subjects can be best adapted to this methodology in order to enhance learners' communicative abilities in L2.

The main difficulties that CLIL programs may present could depend on the preparation of the teachers, the complexity of searching for and choosing appropriate materials, the learners' level of knowledge of the foreign language, and the evaluation of the students.

Some research sustains that both the benefits of CLIL and positive students' responses can depend on the kind of material employed, which needs to be simple to comprehend and approach. Contrariwise, if inappropriate material is provided, this technique risks increasing indecision and anxiety in learners, lowering their confidence, and leading them to total rejection [42]. Some teachers maintain that suitable material in the target language may be beneficial as it can help stimulate learners to study L2, but at the same time, they also recognize that some students may experience it as a further and unnecessary workload [35].

As discussed above, CLIL can be an exceptional innovation [36]. However, so far, it has not been properly handled by the Italian government since it was launched in high schools without taking into consideration important elements first. These elements refer to the teachers' preparation and their training, as well as the indispensable resources that the schools need in order to make this methodology work [6].

Useful resources that each school and the students should need for the implementation of an effective CLIL project include, first of all, good and skilled teachers [43]. The CLIL program can be successful if the teachers have good knowledge and preparation of both the subject taught and the foreign language involved. At present, in Italy, it has not been easy to find teachers with these abilities [6]. According to Di Martino and Di Sabato [44], Italian teachers seem to experience difficulty experimenting with this methodology and express the need to attend specific training courses on CLIL.

Considering the context that I have specified, further implications to be considered are whether long-service teachers could be successfully retrained, what the appropriate training would help teachers to use CLIL, and, above all, which are the resources that Italian students in a private sector need the most in order to learn to speak English effectively through CLIL methodology.

The data analyzed for this analysis suggests that it should be explored more in depth how EFL teachers combined with teachers of other subjects can help FL learners of mixed abilities improve their communicative abilities and lead them to acquire effective speaking strategies when they are exposed to CLIL activities.

According to Cinganotto [39], Italian subject teachers (the non-EFL language teachers) should have at least an advanced level of English (C1 level CEFR) in order to be trained to teach their subjects using CLIL methodology. Unfortunately, in Italy, only a few teachers possess such a high level of English [39]. In simple terms, CLIL programs can be successfully implemented if subject teachers are confident in the foreign language and have a clear picture and effective training of the CLIL pedagogy. Likewise, the students need to possess adequate FL skills to be able to study content subjects in the target language. In addition, CLIL can have successful outcomes if FL teachers and subject teachers cooperate [45], and subject teachers could re-invent themselves as FL language teachers [43].

Taking into account the fact that CLIL is an innovative teaching methodology that is mainly based on ‘cooperative learning’ indispensable resources that the school and the students should need to make it function successfully include multimedia tools such as ICT labs with free internet access providers [46]. This suggests that CLIL is connected to technology. TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning), which is a recent research area that stresses the connection between CLIL, foreign language learning, and technologies, strongly supports the use of technologies at school to assist the various steps of the learning/teaching processes [46]. Hence, the integration of digital content, web tools, open resources, and multimedia platforms could enhance a CLIL learning environment [47]. Digitally enhanced learning environments could help teachers and students adapt themselves to this new approach. The potential of learning technologies could, therefore, have an added value to successful CLIL programs in terms of learners’ enthusiasm and interest, teachers’ innovative techniques, engagement, and positive learning outcomes.

In this last section of the discussion, I am analyzing the key dilemma that I have identified in this paper, which is to investigate how task-based teaching and learning-by-doing practice, which are the principles on which CLIL is based, could successfully lead these Italian learners to progressively develop better EFL speaking skills.

CLIL can give the opportunity to FL students to learn context-based English in an interactive and practical way. It can be a successful approach to helping EFL students improve their speaking skills because they can feel more relaxed while speaking English in class and be less concerned about making mistakes or being assessed, as the majority of CLIL teachers are generally subject teachers and not FL teachers. The study of a CLIL subject implies the consideration of EFL not as a school subject but as a means to pass on information [42].

Students’ engagement is the mainspring of learning; today, learners have greater exposure to a variety of inputs that catch their attention. CLIL could then be the key

to better EFL speaking instruction since it aims to stimulate learners' interests and enhance their enthusiasm and curiosity [31]. In order to reach this goal, the students need to be deeply involved in class activities as the actual protagonists of their learning experiences and their own choices. This could be accomplished because CLIL proposes an innovative approach that is based on dynamic and interactive class activities and experimental learning and teaching [26]. In addition, CLIL tasks are fairly often based on teamwork, which requires the participation of all the students in the class in doing exercises that focus on projects (project-based learning), whose end products can be posters, digital, and interactive outputs.

Some research maintains that many FL students feel more confident and comfortable speaking in pairs rather than in front of the whole class [48]. CLIL can meet this need because, being mainly based on cooperative activities such as peer or group work, it prompts learners to participate actively in class, and therefore it can successfully help them to develop their L2 communicative abilities in a low-pressure scenario [48].

Hence, it is more likely that learners will favorably accept a negotiated syllabus as it could better address their needs [49] and positively affect their commitment, motivation, and gratification [50].

All things considered, it can then be concluded that CLIL lessons could have successful results with regard to the development of the EFL speaking skill if learners are actively engaged in effective and targeted activities implemented with tasks that imply presentations and interactions in English.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the current model of English teaching and learning with regard to speaking is ineffective in the teaching context examined in this article. This model does not seem to prioritize the students' needs to enhance communicative skills and develop practical competence that allows learners to have a good command of EFL structures. Designing an effective and contemporary syllabus in this specified context corroborates the belief that English cannot be satisfactorily taught by relying only on grammar translation practice, literature teaching, and writing and reading tasks. What these learners actually need are oral activities with proper interaction in which they can have the opportunity to train their EFL speaking abilities, and CLIL could address this need.

In this investigation, I have presented clear arguments that CLIL could supply the appropriate conditions to efficiently respond to the young Italian learners' need for better EFL speaking skills. Its adoption in the Italian ELT state and private schools has been experimented with only recently, but with poor results so far for the reasons explained above.

I have examined and counteracted existing literature and research-based knowledge relevant to this area, as well as the as well as the difficulties and resistance towards CLIL projects that learners and teachers could run into in this context. However, setting aside the fears and prejudices against CLIL experimentation in Italy, teachers could realize that this approach may be a feasible alternative to their current teaching practice. This methodology could give young Italian students a significant

opportunity to improve their speaking skills because, apart from helping them to develop effective knowledge and good command of the EFL structural elements and the specific vocabulary of the different technical and scientific subjects, it gives them the chance to learn how to use appropriately these features of language in a wide range of speech domains.

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