



# CLIL, Cooperative Learning and Theatre as Active methodologies in learning language

## CLIL, Cooperative Learning e Teatro come metodologie attive per l'apprendimento delle lingue straniere

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the study and research hypothesis about relations between some active methodologies and teaching languages. Today multicultural society and the push towards the mobility of students – and more generally of the working population – as a strategy for a more complete European integration, require a greater fluency at least in another language than the native one. Similarly, if the linguistic and cultural diversity of the European Union is a great resource, it becomes a challenge among challenges, which necessarily involves teaching language L2 starting from childhood. The theories about learning languages stress the fact that they are always learned inside of a given context, which profoundly affects the learner. Implementing contexts based on Cooperative Learning and on CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning, becomes therefore a perspective that seeks to respond to the demands of innovation and training to agentivity. It also means re-defining the role of teachers in conducting classes. CLIL is characterized by the use of the vehicular language in teaching and it has got its own physiognomy and its approach aims to stimulate learning language through activities that orient the interest in learning the content of a non-language subject based on cooperative learning. Using a Theatre setting (drama and theatre) as an alternative, holistic learning environment, means achieving the best conditions of a communicative and innovative way of teaching.

Questo articolo presenta lo studio e le ipotesi di ricerca in merito alle relazioni tra alcune metodologie attive e l'insegnamento delle lingue. La società multiculturale odierna e la spinta verso la mobilità degli studenti – e più in generale della popolazione attiva – come strategia per una più completa integrazione europea, richiedono una maggiore padronanza di almeno un'altra lingua rispetto a quella nativa. Allo stesso modo, se la diversità linguistica e culturale dell'Unione europea è una grande risorsa, essa diventa una sfida tra le sfide, che implica necessariamente la lingua di insegnamento L2 a partire dall'infanzia. Le teorie circa l'apprendimento delle lingue sottolineano il fatto che sono sempre apprese all'interno di un dato contesto, che coinvolge profondamente il discente. Implementare contesti basati sul Cooperative Learning e sul CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning, diventa quindi una prospettiva che cerca di rispondere alle esigenze di innovazione e di formazione all'agentività. Significa anche ridefinire il ruolo degli insegnanti nel condurre le classi. Il CLIL si caratterizza per l'uso della lingua veicolare nell'insegnamento e ha una sua fisionomia e il suo approccio mira a stimolare l'apprendimento delle lingue attraverso attività che orientano l'interesse nell'apprendere il contenuto di una materia non linguistica sulla base di apprendimento cooperativo. Usare il teatro (drammatizzazione e rappresentazione) come un alternativo, olistico, ambiente di apprendimento, significa realizzare le migliori condizioni di un modo comunicativo e innovativo di insegnamento.

### KEYWORDS

CLIL. Cooperative Learning, Theatre Setting, L2 Teaching and Learning, Constructivist Theory.  
CLIL; Cooperative Learning; Setting Teatrale, Insegnamento-Apprendimento L2, Teoria costruttivista.

## Introduction

The emphasis on learning language is further prominence within the overall strategy outlined in the Europe 2020 framework, where language skills play a key role (Eurydice, 2012). Considering the perspective of integration and cooperation required, it is therefore crucial to improve the quality and efficiency of language learning (EU, 2009), as outlined in the “Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (EC, 2012)” and it becomes specific part of the wider argument in educational innovation that has long innervated the international debate. Constantly the results of comparative research on students’ learning (OECD-Pisa, 2013) are emphasized and, more recently, both the research on the effectiveness of teaching (OECD-Talis, 2009, 2013) and necessary innovation of learning environments (OECD-Ceri, 2013) demonstrate the need in defining new ways of teaching innovation. Also, another perspective highlights what learning – even language – takes in students’ lives: rather than being “functionalist” learning – from Nussbaum’s perspective (2012) – it becomes a carrier that supplies the understood capacities as the effective potential on which the “human flourishing” is based (Nussbaum, 2011; Alessandrini, 2014).

Providing the opportunity to learn a second foreign language since childhood, forms and offers the possibility to every human being to act his freedom of choice in a world today increasingly marked by mobility and meeting with other cultures. This perspective of capabilities becomes substantial because it expresses the importance to the investment that Europe should operate in young people, representing one-fifth of the population and that, by 2020, will have to deal with that 35% of all jobs that require high-level qualifications, combined with the ability innovation and adaption (EU, 2009).

In this new context, learning languages becomes a factor for success and personal and social development, within a society in strong change in multicultural direction. European citizenship is a matter of relevance, even if constantly to negotiate and requires that our local action – we study, we work, we stay in our country – is affected by European “thinking”, “feeling” and “acting”. Further, linguistic competence is one of the dimensions that make up the framework of the European skills for lifelong learning. Paradigm that has long been progressively facing in school curricula in Europe until it became characterizing the Italian National Guidelines for the Curriculum (MIUR, 2007; 2012), from which it is clear the active dimension of learning: students are asked to carry out competent actions through the mobilization and intentional direction of resources needed.

It follows that learning contexts should provide students with the opportunity to be actively involved in learning tasks, together with the others and in steady interaction and participation, to exercise and train their skills in the class.

### 1. Theory

A OECD-Ceri survey (2008) about innovative learning environment found that the learning environment recognizes learners as the main protagonists, encourages their active engagement and develops in them the awareness of their activities. This means, for learners, developing the “meta-cognitive skills” to monitor, evaluate and optimize their acquisition and use of knowledge. Neurosciences show that the human brain is for interaction and the key role of emotions is the most important in making effective learning. Therefore, the environment needs

to be student-centered, structured, and well-crafted, deeply personalised (sensitive to differences in background), inclusive (includes weaker boys), social (group setting). The quality of learning environments (OECD-Ceri, 2012), is now presented as a variable key for the quality of individual and social learning, confirming some features that belong to the active pedagogy – cooperation, positive climate, respect, solidarity – which are elements of today’s research evidence based (OECD-ILE, 2013; OECD-Talis, 2013). It follows that – according to Nussbaum’s thinking (2012) – the learning context – above all for languages – becomes particularly relevant if we assume the mail categorization with respect to capabilities: those internal (personal traits, intellectual and emotional abilities, perception and movement abilities) and those combined (acquired through interaction with the environment). Thus, we can detect and take over as capabilities are the sum of the internal capabilities and the socio-political and economic ones, where “functionings” could arise, where learning environment is a summary of adults-teachers’ choices, conditions, abilities, freedom and who organize and direct the learning contexts. The investment in the quality of teaching can then result in increased learning, but what is essential to a right society is the link that takes education and guarantee of the rights of human beings to express real choices and give them the possibility to live one’s life as preferred. The “welfare of the capabilities” – according to Sen (1999) – allows everybody to require the practicability of social rights: at first, the right to learn. Learning should therefore be viewed in the heart of the active welfare. Schools should pay more attention to issues related to learning practice, collegial and collaborative dimension, to skills in project management, development of entrepreneurial skills. In this scenario, how to learn, then, foreign languages? What innovative contexts for learning?

Implementing contexts based on Cooperative Learning and on CLIL, then becomes a perspective that seeks to respond to the demands of teaching and learning innovation. CLIL method consists in spending part of the weekly timetable in learning subjects or specific modules through another language, thus integrating a foreign language learning with other disciplines. In a CLIL class we have two main purposes: one relating to the curricular or thematic content, the other one connected to the language. For this reason CLIL is sometimes referred to double Education purposes (Moghadan, Fatemipour, 2014). CLIL facilitates the practice of languages and determines a positive attitude in the students as makes them aware of their progress, although modest, and demonstrates that the path to improve and develop their language skills is open in front of them. CLIL and Cooperative Learning methodologies require that teaching is integrated, through a collaboration among all members of the teaching team. The teaching team is composed by teachers who concretely implement the module, but also by all teachers who work, making suggestions, materials, carrying out functions of observation, evaluation and action research, and creating a climate of trust which must accompany each experimental teaching action.

A so created context would like to express how much educational research has shown, namely that students learn more deeply and work better on the tasks assigned them by teachers, if they have the opportunity to engage in activities that require them to solve problems related to real-world situations, in a cooperative context (Darling-Hammond, 2008). The positive results of learning are noted when the students during classroom activities, participate in lectures that require to organize skills considering alternatives; when the students are involved in detailed research and thorough analysis and report writing; when they are asked to communicate the results to other classmates – those of other classes or outside experts – who can evaluate their work.

Similarly – as defined by the National Italian Guidelines, Ministry of Education (MIUR 2012) – the pedagogical quality of the educational environment should be subject to explicit design and testing.

And still, why choosing a teaching language centered on a setting theatre?

The work methodology in the lab aims to teach students to take full advantages from their individual skills. The theatre practice becomes pedagogy because it aims to the development of individual creativity while respecting the uniqueness of each one and performs a synthesis of pre-expressivity dimension, that belongs to each individual, and methodology. Theatre as an open laboratory means to seek strategies to act together and to establish relationships between those who participate. In the group situation, you are faced with the problem of the relationship with the others, starting with the respect for diversity and the desire to communicate one's emotions. The theatre lab is, therefore, a valuable tool to foster relationships.

Recent studies and research on the role of interaction in the processes of knowledge and on the importance of classroom climate for learning, confirm that the theatre is an effective strategy as it enables collaboration and the establishment of belonging feelings, which constitute a positive reinforcement to motivation to learn.

In particular, the theatre is an appropriate tool to encourage communication, since, on one hand, it requires a willingness to interact and direct experimentation, on the other hand it implies a concrete answer and use of energy. Furthermore, the drama, focusing on the fiction and the “as if”, stimulates curiosity.

Learning languages experiences, based on “drama” (considered a curricular activity that is based on the technical assumption of roles and simulation of real-life situations: role-playing) and “theatre” (a concept typically extracurricular, which focuses the attention on the final representation and on the relationship with the audience and stimulates the use of communication in a foreign language through the “learning by doing”), form students skills (Cangià, 1998).

The theatre has got a huge power to evoke and stir emotions in everybody and ensures that they are shared. To talk about emotions and, above all, about the language of the emotions, it is essential that everyone learn to observe one's own personal experience in an inter-subjective relationship.

The theatre does not necessarily pursue a determined final product. The process of learnings, in fact, much more important. The modern teaching method puts on this item a particular emphasis: what really counts at the end of each teaching sequence is not so much the immediate effect on learners, but the processes of learning started (Magnani, 2002). The theatre, as open and dynamic activity, facilitates the development of a flexible and open-minded, ready to adapt to unforeseen situations and tolerate diversity of classmates. From all these features it is evident how theatre is a teaching activity highly motivating, involving the role of the learner in a holistic manner, aiming at the development of the totality of his personality. The learner who simultaneously learns and uses a theatre technique realizes a concrete experience that goes far beyond the simple linguistic school communication. His learning will be a cognitive experience (for complex operations related to language), emotional (for the strong emotional components), and at the same time pragmatic (because it acts through language).

All of this is connected with Vygotskian's constructivist theory (1978), in which it is fundamental the mediation of others – languages and processes – to develop the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and to lead the individual – and social – construction of knowledge.

## 2. Method of initial study

This paper presents an initial study carried out in Lecce, a small town located in the south of Italy. The aim is to investigate two aspects related to the methodologies used (CLIL and Cooperative Learning): the knowledge and development of skills.

The assumptions that we make are the following:

- I\_1 “in relation to knowledge, since active methods have been subjected to experimental tests that give students the power of direction of their own learning, positive results are expected and numerically higher in the experimental classes using the CLIL in a context specially defined by a setting theatre in relation to language skills of L2 (English), spoken and written, as the methods used belong to the so-called active methodologies”.
- I\_2: “in relation to training and mastery of skills, since the methods used and the setting theatre are strongly oriented to communication, feedback, awareness and recognition of emotions, as well as the activation of subjective, intersubjective and social learning resources, skills most widespread are expected in group work, feedback and recognition of the best conditions for one’s learning”.
- I\_3 “in relation to the professional development of teachers, since the methods used in conducting classes, and other forms of training, supervision and discussion, provide consistently active and reflective procedures, more self-assessment skills about their learning attitudes are expected by teachers involved in the experimental classes”.

*The reference population.* To investigate the presented hypothesis, the first classes of technical schools or colleges of Lecce will be involved, which will be selected by random method within the target population, with the intention (approximately) to involve the entire population of the first year of 2 institutes.

The first classes will be involved for a period of two scholastic annualities – and then until the completion of the first two years of secondary school equivalent to compulsory schooling – in order to allow a study of longitudinal type both on content and on skills further comparable to national and international surveys (Invalsi – Italian National Assessment – and OECD-PISA items).

*Research design.* The research design will be almost-experimental, and will involve 4 classes (two experimental and two of control) by giving pre-tests, intermediate tests and post-tests.

*Monitoring Tools to investigate variables.* The variables to be investigated in relation to definition of the hypothesis are the following:

- V\_a) linguistic knowledge in L2);
- V\_b) know how to work in groups;
- V\_c) develop the ability to give and receive feedback;
- V\_d) recognize personal emotions related to the learning context.

As a result, it is assumed to use the following tools to verify variables:

- V\_a) A1- B1 level standardized tests for language proficiency in L2;
- V\_b) rubric of competence and observation “know how to work in groups”;
- V\_c) rubric of competence and observation “develop the ability to give and receive feedback”;



V\_d) questionnaires and interviews to “recognize personal emotions related to the learning context.”

According to CLIL methodology the project of a modern learning environment, based on constructive principles, best responds to the needs of an integrated teaching of disciplinary matters and foreign languages. Geography or history contents, reworked in the small group, encourage the learning process of the individual, increase motivation in the direction of the comparison with these contents and involve in the process of learning learners. Such an approach requires the ability to work independently, which is being developed, in turn, in the context of group work. For these reasons among the expectations we note a greater effectiveness in learning English language L2 through the use of CLIL methodology.

Similarly we expect – through the stage of video research – the definition of an innovative curriculum integration CLIL and CL, providing teachers with a significant contribution in learning innovative methodologies and support them during the application.

### 3. Evidences Research

The linguistic and cultural diversity of the European Union is a great resource, but also a major challenge.

Improving the quality and efficiency of language learning has become one of key objectives of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (EC, 2011). The framework emphasizes the need to make citizens able to communicate in two languages apart their native one, promote teaching languages and offer migrants the opportunity to learn the language of the host country. Language learning has also acquired a prominent place in leading initiatives included in the overall strategy European Union (2010) – Europa 2020 – that promotes smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Language skills, in particular, as a means of encouraging mobility of EU citizens play a vital role in the efforts Youth on the Move and a new Agenda for new skills and jobs (Eurydice, Eurostat, 2012).

The indicators of Eurostat show as in secondary school stands out the relatively low percentage of students studying languages in professional or pre-professional fields of study in comparison to those attending general education and the relatively limited range of foreign languages studied at school: in both cases, it is an important issue in a multilingual Europe with a globalized economy. To be effective, teaching foreign languages needs highly qualified teachers. In addition to relevant qualifications, language teachers foreign must be in possession of adequate and appropriate learning resources.

Finally, the research shows that the key to a successful learning is motivation and that high exposure to foreign languages facilitates the acquisition of language skills.

In all countries except Denmark, Greece, Iceland and Turkey, schools give students the opportunity to study some non-language subjects in two different languages (CLIL). In Austria CLIL methodology for teaching the first foreign language is used to all pupils aged 6 to 8 years; students follow an integrated lesson weekly during which the subjects in the curriculum are taught in a foreign language.

In most of the countries participating to ESLC (European Survey on Language Competences, 2011), students tested declare that information and communication technologies (TIC) are not used regularly during foreign language lessons. However, the situation varies considerably: in the Netherlands, 31.5% of students regularly use computer programs, while in the Belgium French and German Community the percentage is respectively 3.6% and 3.2%.

More input students receive, higher is their performance. One of the systems to increase the exposure of students to foreign languages is that students and teachers use the target language in class. Nevertheless, in almost all countries to ESLC participants, students claim that their teachers do not regularly use the foreign language taught, the, but they use it only occasionally, or at best assumptions, often but not always.

Motivation is the key factor for effective learning. The perception of the usefulness of language by students can contribute without doubt to increase their motivation.

The European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) indicates that the relationship between the perception of students of the usefulness of learning languages and their linguistic competence is positive (European Commission, 2007; European Commission SurveyLang, 2012). Students were asked to express their opinion about the usefulness of foreign languages for the following objectives: personal life, future school career, future working life and looking for a good job.

The students' perception of the usefulness of foreign languages is quite similar in all European countries. Most of students consider English useful for high school career and future work – more than 80% for future work (except in France) – and even more about the research for a good employment. This shows that students consider English useful not only in finding a job, but to find a good job.

## Discussion

Students' mobility and intercultural exchanges are among the central elements of the policy of modern education, especially with regard to foreign languages learning. The integration of these activities in the process of learning language outside the traditional school context gives meaning to the practice on the oral proficiency of the foreign language, presents new learning opportunities, contributing to intercultural experiences of the students and increase their awareness towards other languages and cultures. At school level, mobility and intercultural communication can be inserted in many ways in extracurricular activities related to foreign language learning. In 2011 the ESLC examined students participation projects in cooperation with foreign schools and trips. On average, in the participating countries, about 25% of students recently participated at this type of extra-curricular activities related to foreign languages learning.

As we discussed, the aim of this research is to study the benefits of CLIL on students. It exposes students to an innovative approach to learning which extends beyond the traditional limits of the school curriculum. It gives them the chance to use language in a natural way by "thinking" in the language and not just learning about the language itself as the main focus. Still, it improves students' cognitive skills through the study of techniques and ways of learning outside the usual parameters of the language classroom. Finally, it helps students to identify more with the target language culture than when formally studied as a language, thereby improving international understanding and tolerance.

## Conclusions

The data from International research show how, facing a society that is changing rapidly, particularly in Europe, where the changes were produced by the processes of integration, the advantage of being able to speak several languages is becoming increasingly evident. In this context of continuous change, and considering more recent studies on language learning, CLIL assumes a very important methodological nature. We know that multilingualism promotion, namely learning a different language than the native one, brings to social, economic, cultural benefits. Thanks to CLIL and Cooperative Learning method students have the opportunity to develop their ability to use language also in the future, in deeply way. A foreign language is, therefore, a subject only to learn or is it also a means to communicate? "Making language" becomes a means of total immersion in the same foreign language. Hence the proposal to use the theatre as a method of learning environment and as a valid methodology in teaching by cooperative learning. "Doing theatre" in a foreign language, means combining the prescriptive requirements of the language, but also communicating and living a context which is different from ours. In this way schools have the opportunity to become a real Innovative Learning Environment to express the quality of teaching and learning across curriculum.

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