Teacher training

Content and Language Integrated Learning with Technologies: a global online training experience

Letizia Cinganotto
INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research, Italy)
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l.cinganotto@indire.it

Abstract

The focus of this report is the link between CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), and in particular, the added value technologies can bring to the learning/ teaching of a foreign language and to the delivery of subject content through a foreign language. An example of a free online global training initiative on these topics will be described: "Techno-CLIL for EVO 2016". An overview of the course will be offered, detailing some of the asynchronous and synchronous activities proposed during the five-week training experience which registered about 5000 participants from all over the world. Special attention will be devoted to the feedback from the teachers on how this experience helped their professional growth as reflective practitioners.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Teacher Training.

1. Introduction

In this early part of the 21st century the range of technologies available for use in language learning and teaching has become very diverse and the ways that they are being used in classrooms all over the world have become central to language practice. (Motteram, 2013, p.5).

The aforementioned quotation conveys the increasing importance technologies are having in language learning/ teaching and in the delivery of subject content through a foreign language, through CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology (Marsh, 1994; Coyle et al., 2010; Mehisto et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2010; Langé & Cinganotto, 2014), which is spreading more and more all over Europe (Eurydice, 2012). In particular, Motteram (2013) and the other authors of the book offer an interesting overview of the ongoing debate in the field of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), at the different levels of education. Moreover, Motteram introduces a very interesting socio-cultural analysis of CALL, which takes into account the key role of teachers in an EFL or in a CLIL class, considering not only the aspects of the teaching practice we may easily observe, but a lot of other indicators and variables, such as:

the time that they live in, or the place, the phase of education, the choice of a pedagogical approach, whether, for example, mobiles are allowed in the classroom, whether students have internet access at home, the attitudes of the community to the language that they are learning… (Motteram, 2013, p. 178).

The paper will focus on an example of a free online training initiative addressed to teachers and educators from all over the world, aimed at improving the continuous professional development in the field of CLIL and CALL, by activating a lot of different socio-cultural dimensions which are relevant to overcoming the challenges of 21st century education.

2. Overview of the online training initiative

During January and February 2016, the author of this paper, in cooperation with Daniela Cuccurullo, EFL teacher and CALL expert, moderated a free five-week training session on CLIL and ICT, titled "Techno-CLIL for EVO 2016". EVO, Electronic Village Online, TESOL International, is a global community of peers mainly dealing with language teaching and technologies. Techno-CLIL aimed at fulfilling the following objectives:

- discussing the theory, methodology and practice behind a CLIL approach
- considering how to plan CLIL class activities using the Internet and 2.0 web tools
- discussing teaching and assessing learners through a CLIL approach
- reflecting upon the participants' awareness of what CLIL is and on how to teach through it.

Therefore, the session was aimed at reinforcing the links between CLIL and ICT, eliciting reflections and discussions among teachers and sharing good practices from the different countries through synchronous and asynchronous activities.

This was the outline of the syllabus throughout the five weeks:

Week 1

Brainstorming

Introductions: sharing experiences with CLIL, comparing methodologies and strategies from a global perspective.

Week 2

Surfing the net

Exploring the potential of Web 2.0 in the implementation of CLIL. Suggestions, ideas and formats were given to design a digital CLIL lesson plan.

Week 3

CLIL pathways

Planning and implementing a CLIL path in sciences or humanities using web tools and the internet.

Week 4

Reading in CLIL

Exploring the potential of extensive reading to design a CLIL lesson, considering that books and eBooks can provide effective links to CLIL activities.

Week 5

CLIL repository

Guided web tours in groups to find resources such as videos and other materials in order to build up a repository of good practices for an innovative CLIL environment, such as BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) or flipped teaching practices.

The following dimensions were taken into account for the planning of the course:

- *Learner-centeredness*

The variety of online tools draw on individual learning styles and help become more versatile learners: the whole training pathway was designed to make participants the real protagonists of their learning experience, actively involving them from the very beginning.

- *Collaborative learning*

Online group work allows learners to become more active participants. Collaborative learning requires that learners understand inputs, organize and express their thinking with carefully constructed language in a coherent way. That was particularly demanding in Techno-CLIL, as for the majority of the participants English was not their mother tongue (a great number of them were Italian). A huge community of practice was

established through institutional channels (Moodle, WizIq, Wiki) and through informal environments, such as Facebook, where they could interact and help each other during the five weeks of training.

- *Easy access to global resources*

The course was designed to make a vast use of Open Educational Resources, guiding the participants to access online databases and resources relevant for CLIL.

- *Experiential learning*

New technologies can be used to engage and motivate students and improve their learning outcomes. One of the aims of the initiative was to spread sensitiveness towards the use of ICT for language learning/ teaching and for CLIL, through practical activities. Techno-CLIL was designed as a laboratory where participants could feel free to discover new tools and experiment them without any fear of mistakes.

3. Asynchronous activities

Asynchronous learning can be carried out by learners on their own, at their own pace, enjoying taking their time to accomplish tasks and assignments.

Each module was structured with asynchronous activities to carry out on the Moodle platform by downloading digital content, visiting suggested websites and online resources, uploading different kinds of assignments. For each module a specific forum thread encouraged the participants to share ideas and materials and to discuss the topic of the module.

A very interesting and useful aspect of the forum was the peer learning perspective, as teachers were invited to post their own contribution, but at the same time they had to read and comment on at least one post from the community forum. This led the participants to reflect, not only on their own learning pathway, but also on their peers', comparing the progress made and the activities carried out by their colleagues. This is advisable in order for the teacher to become a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983).

Figure 1 below (Rose, n.d.), taken from the ECML-funded project under the title "Quality Assurance and Self-assessment for Schools and Teachers", can be considered as an inspiration for the teachers, who should always be able to reflect on their teaching practice and constantly review their plan or teaching element, taking into account many variables, such as their colleagues' experience, the students' learning outcomes, reactions and satisfaction, feedback from the school community, progress made, previous teaching elements, etc.
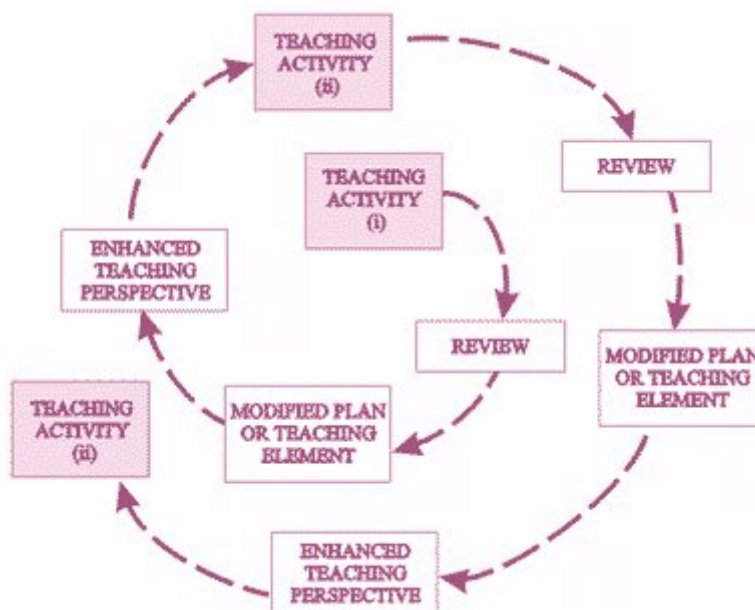

Figure 1. The reflective teacher.

In order to help the participants reflect more on their learning experience and on the competences acquired during the course, to be later applied in their classes, a transversal task was established across the five-week pathway, which consisted of a learning diary where the participants had to choose the web tool they preferred and note down the most relevant steps of their learning, collecting pictures, videos, resources, etc.

The results were outstanding: the teachers opted for a wide range of web tools, according to their favourite communicative and learning style. Some of them decided to document only the most relevant aspects of their adventure in Techno-CLIL, while others wanted to collect and remember each and every activity, webinar or resource.

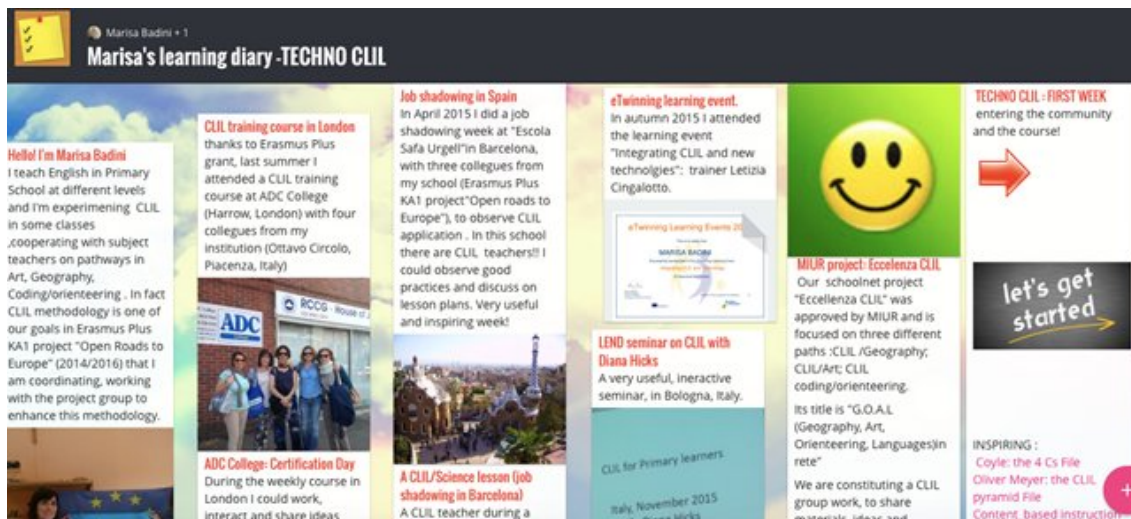An example of learning diary created with Padlet is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. An example of learning diary using Padlet (reproduced with permission).

Padlet is a powerful webapp which allows messages, audio files, videos, pictures to be posted on a digital board that can be shared with other internet users. They can interact with the board, posting their own comments or files.

Padlet was one of the most common tools the teachers used to create their learning diary, as the graphic effects it generates are impressive. In the example shown in Figure 2, the teacher interweaves in her posts, significant moments from her past professional development with relevant memories from her Techno-CLIL experience.

Another task which was assigned to help the teachers' self-reflection was "My experience in Techno-CLIL" template, which was aimed at collecting the participants' feedback about different specific aspects of the training initiative, such as their favourite webinar, the easiest activity, the most useful resource etc. This template was not only a self-reflection tool, but also an important instrument to help the moderators understand weaknesses and strengths of Techno-CLIL.

Figure 3. An example of "My experience in Techno-CLIL" form. Nicoletta Ferri's form can be found here.

Asynchronous learning can lead to feelings of isolation, if there is no real interactive educational environment. That is why the moderators decided to combine asynchronous with synchronous learning, organizing a series of webinars with experts in CLIL or CALL, so that participants could get inspiration from live learning events.

4. Synchronous activities

The main benefit of synchronous learning is that it enables students to avoid feelings of isolation since they are in communication with others throughout the learning process. Synchronous learning is not as flexible in terms of time as you have to connect at a certain time to attend a live session. In addition to this, Techno-CLIL, as a global initiative, covered different time zones all over the world. Nevertheless, webinars were greatly appreciated: they were attended by an average of 150/200 participants each time. Recordings were available soon after, so that all the participants could watch them later on.

According to Feenberg (1998), *"online learning is most effective when delivered by teachers experienced in their subject matter. The best way to maintain the connection between online education and the values of traditional education is through ensuring that online learning is 'delivered' by teachers, fully qualified and interested in teaching*

online in a web-based environment". The fact that highly-qualified experts would volunteer as speakers for Techno-CLIL was an added value for the participants and a guarantee for scientific quality and global value.

Among the well-known speakers, just to mention some of them: Gisella Langé, inspector from the Italian Ministry of Education; María J. Frígols, from Valencia University; Carmel Mary Coonan, from Venice University; Kent Anderson, editor of the CLILSTORE website; Kristina Cunningham, senior policy officer in charge of Multilingualism in the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. Ana Gimeno Sanz, former President of EUROCALL, the European Association for Computer-Assisted Language Learning delivered a very interesting webinar on the role of digital storytelling for CLIL, reporting on a project carried out at the Technical University of Valencia, with her Aerospace Engineering students, engaged in producing digital stories for their Technical English class.

Webinars turned out to be very successful as they gave the participants the opportunity to interact with colleagues, moderators and experts through text or voice chat.

5. Main outcomes

The following comments from some of the participants collected through the final survey can summarize in an effective way the main outcomes of the course, by recalling some steps of the course itself. The participants were invited to respond to the following prompt:

Explain briefly what you have learnt from TECHNO-CLIL and what you may use in your future teaching.

> *The units of the various modules have represented a progression in CLIL understanding, starting with an introduction that explains the differences between traditional and CLIL methods in foreign language learning/teaching; the basics of CLIL, carried out through the reading of specialized texts and videos dealing with the theoretical aspects of this methodology, and finally, an account of CLIL elements and issues, leading to CLIL language identification and acquisition (CLIL glossary) and an essential competence (contents) assessment. It was a very interesting activity for me, which sparked immediate curiosity and expectations. The activity, in my opinion, has achieved a good level of personal satisfaction with the ability to address and manage a new teaching situation and was significant compared to the motivation and to learning.*

The participant has summarized the main steps of the course, expressing a high level of motivation and interest in a new teaching situation which has become a challenge for him/her.

> *Bottom line at the end of the CLIL course I have better understood and I feel able to:*
>
> - *Break down instructions*
> - *Evaluate language challenges in the classroom*
> - *Use mode language*
> - *Develop enquiry-based learning*
> - *Increase communication in English*
> - *Improve assessment methods and feedback.*

The above mentioned comment is interesting as it details the competences acquired during the course, after a self-reflection process which has led the teacher to a deep professional improvement.

> *In my working daily life this activity gave me the abilities to:*
>
> - *Design new unit learning*
> - *Use other colleagues' lessons which I considered interesting and applicable to my classes and teaching purposes*
> - *Raise my ability towards the lesson planning approach of both subjects: Mathematics and Physics.*

Results from the work:

- *Satisfaction*
- *Amazement*
- *Fun*
- *Change in the teaching / learning approach (more attention, interest, participation, enthusiasm, efficiency, improved outcomes …).*

Working in such a diverse group with different experience and training has been a new and exciting departure, and getting involved has enabled new insights and reflections, re-motivating also my approach to the curricular subjects I teach (Mathematics and Physics).

The above mentioned comment is also a very deep self-reflection and meta-cognition of the learning experience, matching the competences acquired with satisfaction, amazement and fun. It is also worth underlining how different the teacher feels after this training experience: he/she has totally changed his/her learning/teaching approach and her attitudes towards the subjects he/she teaches: that was one the most challenging aims of the whole initiative itself.

I learned to see CLIL as an opportunity to open the door of knowledge through the English language; I discovered that on the Web there are countless free resources and tools for innovative learning (extensive reading, flipped classroom, techno-CLIL); I also found it very helpful to share my work and my opinions with adventure colleagues.

This participant has also found a new world thanks to Techno-CLIL: a lot of resources and materials which were shown through guided web tours. What is more, the participant has discovered how important it is to share materials, ideas and resources with colleagues ("adventure colleagues" sounds funny but meaningful): a mutual enrichment for the community of peers. The peer learning experience and the sharing perspective were also among the aims of the course.

6. Feedback

The session was particularly successful: almost 5000 participants joined the Moodle platform. The feedback was extremely positive and rewarding: they were satisfied with the content and the structure of the pathway, as Figure 4 shows:
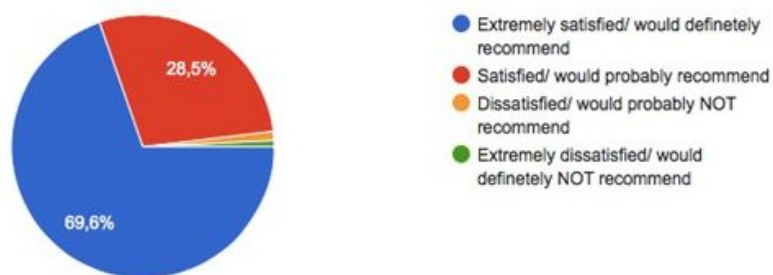

Figure 4. Overall satisfaction with the course.

The combination of the different working tools and environments was deemed positive, even if a small percentage (13,3%) of the participants got confused while switching from the Moodle platform (for the asynchronous activities) to the WizIq platform (for the live webinars), or to the informal environments such as Facebook.

This kind of feedback, however, is particularly interesting and useful, especially for the planning of the next EVO session which will take place in January 2017. It is important to consider the mixed digital abilities of the target participants, who may be not familiar with Personal Learning Environments (PLE) and Personal Learning Networks (PLN) (Chatti et al., 2010) and may get lost while switching from one tool to another or from one environment to another. A better introduction and familiarization with the working tools at the beginning of the next session would probably help.

The following hint was proposed in the final survey:

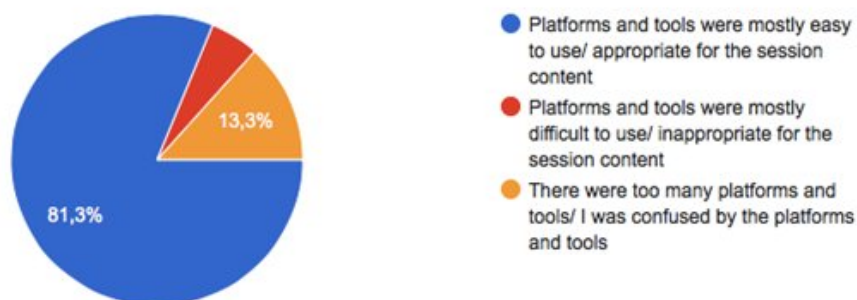Please rate the platforms and tools used in the session (Padlet, Wiki, Moodle, Learning Designer etc.)

Figure 5. Platforms and tools.

In the final survey the participants were asked to imagine writing a message to a colleague, listing the reasons why he/she would/not recommend Techno-CLIL.

Below are some of the participants' messages:

> *I would recommend Techno-CLIL for the amount of reading materials offered, for the opportunity to be involved in inspiring webinars, for the web sources suggested and the technological tools shown as well. Moreover, being involved in a community of teachers whose desire to improve is at a very high level has made the course an amazing opportunity to get in touch with highly professional people. The moderators have done an amazing job, coordinating all the community involved. I now know much more about CLIL, flipped education, extensive reading and how to use the 2.0 tools. Taking part in such a course has been the most useful experience ever experienced in my teaching career on both a professional and a personal side.*

This message is very encouraging, pointing out the quality of the course but also the positive and enriching experience as a member of a community of inspired professionals.

> *It was really a great opportunity for personal and professional enrichment. It opened up a world unknown to me. I was able to learn how to plan CLIL activities in the classroom using Internet and technology 2.0. I could compare different experiences through forums, wikis, blogs and webinars discussing theory, methodology and practice of this innovative teaching method.*

This teacher stresses the innovative aspects of CLIL and the enrichment he/she could get thanks to Techno-CLIL and the different working tools proposed during the course.

> *CLIL is finally "also" an effective teaching method of a curricular discipline in English because: it allows you to learn the language more effectively and to enrich vocabulary through the contents offered by another discipline. It allows you to learn the content of the discipline through reflection on language keywords. We must be careful not to confuse the role of the subject teacher with the English teacher who remains the true language expert. Techno-CLIL is definitely good for your own culture, for the knowledge of the pupils and it is especially good for the soul of the teacher… I never felt alone on this path!!!*

This comment focuses on the definition of CLIL methodology, as the teacher conceives it: an effective teaching method which can be an added value to the teaching of a curricular subject. According to this participant, the true language expert will always be the language teacher: it is easy to understand how CLIL is a hot issue both for subject and for language teachers, although in some countries, such as Italy, the CLIL teacher is a subject teacher who has developed high language competences (C1 level according

to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) and methodological competences in CLIL after attending specific post-graduate university courses.

The following remark is particularly impressive and could be considered as a sort of slogan for the future editions of Techno-CLIL:

> *TECHNO-CLIL opens your mind. Let's do CLIL… you will not regret it!*

7. Conclusions

The aim of this report was to present an online global training experience on CLIL and CALL carried out in 2016 within an international community of teachers, trainers and educators. Through a brief description of the syllabus and of some of the most relevant asynchronous and synchronous activities proposed during the five-week pathway, the contribution tried to show the added value of technologies when delivering subject content in a foreign language through CLIL methodology. The main outcomes of the course were also depicted by recalling some of the participants' comments. The experience represented an opportunity for professional and personal enrichment and growth for about 5000 participants, eager to experiment new tools and methods in their classes and to share their products with other colleagues from all over the world.

The road leading to good teaching practices encompasses a self-reflective and meta-cognitive process of the competences acquired and Techno-CLIL wanted to help a community of peers reach this goal. According to the participants' feedback it appears to have succeeded.

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