OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, ICT
AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES
FOR CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

by **Letizia Cinganotto**

INDIRE, Rome, Italy, 00197

l.cinganotto @ indire.it

and **Daniela Cuccurullo**

IT GIORDANI STRIANO, Naples, Italy, 80127

danielacuccurullo @ gmail.com

Abstract

The present contribution is aimed at describing one of the latest trends in the European school curricula: the teaching of subject content in a foreign language (CLIL), which is becoming more and more popular all over Europe, also bearing in mind the latest recommendations from the European Commission. Starting with a brief theoretical background on CLIL, the article focuses on OER (Open Educational Resources) and digital tools that have strongly changed and reshaped the educational landscape, offering a lot of opportunities for CLIL teachers and trainers. This scenario has also changed the interaction among teachers, building up virtual communities of practice aimed at sharing ideas and good practices for better quality teaching/learning. Some examples of these CLIL communities are provided.

Keywords*:* CLIL; OER; virtual communities; ICT; informal learning

1. Introduction

There has been an exponential growth in the use of technology for language learning and teaching purposes in the recent years. This may be due to the fact that 21st century learners are constantly exposed to ICT during their daily life. Mobile devices and social networks are the common way in which they interact with their peers and with the external world, constantly mixing formal and informal learning experiences. This is particularly effective for the development of language competences, as informal learning may have a key role in the progress made by students. It is even better when the focus of the learning is two-fold, concentrating both on language and on subject content, as it happens with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). OER (Open Educational Resources) and digital tools have created new learning and teaching scenarios also impacting teachers' continuous professional

development, which often interweaves formal, informal and non-formal pathways and is based on learning communities and networks connecting teachers and educators from all over the world.

2. CLIL potential

The term 'CLIL' (Content and Language Integrated Learning) was introduced by David Marsh in 1994. It refers to a "dual approach", considering both the development of language competences and the teaching of curricular subjects (Marsh, 2013). According to one of the latest reports from Eurydice, *Key Data on Teaching Languages in Europe* (2012)[1], this methodology is becoming more and more popular all over Europe, as it represents the added value for a better quality in education.

The integration of Content and Language does not refer to any particular foreign language, but may depend on national policies and on school choices. CLIL represents a real revolution, which impacts all the actors of the school system (headmasters, language teachers, subject teachers, language assistants, parents, students, etc. – Mehisto et al., 2008).

As the European Commission has recently pointed out (*Improving the Effectiveness of Language Learning: CLIL and Computer Assisted Language Learning*, June 2014[2]), CLIL methodology is one of the most innovative ways to improve the quality of education, the organization of the school setting and the students' participation, engagement and learning outcomes, especially if combined with the use of the new technologies in a new learning scenario (Coyle et al., 2010).

In Italy CLIL was introduced in 2010 as mandatory in all upper secondary schools (Langé & Cinganotto, 2014). There is no specific reference to a particular foreign language, although the majority of schools usually opt for English, except for "Licei Linguistici[3]", where CLIL in two foreign languages must be provided.

3. OER for CLIL

CLIL classes have been recently enriched and empowered by the introduction of OER (Open Educational Resources) into the teaching/learning process. At the heart of the movement towards Open Educational Resources is the idea that the world's knowledge is public and that technology in general and the Internet in particular provide an opportunity for everyone to

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[1] http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/Eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143EN.pdf
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/languages/library/studies/clil-call_en.pdf
[3] "Licei Linguistici" are upper secondary schools with particular focus on foreign languages, cultures and literatures.

share, use, and reuse it (Smith and Casserly, 2006). According to UNESCO, "Open Educational Resources are any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. The nature of these open materials means that anyone can legally and freely copy, use, adapt and re-share them"[4].

The idea was born in 2001, when Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) decided to release all its courses and make them free for online access. Since then, more and more universities and institutions have decided to follow this move and the phenomenon has become increasingly popular. In 2002 UNESCO organized the 1st Global OER Forum where the acronym 'OER' was born. The Paris OER Declaration by UNESCO adopted in June 2012 was the first step towards the development of policies supporting OER. In fact, it was aimed at encouraging policy makers to support the use of OER and their integration within the educational pathways. In 2013 the Communication from the European Commission *Opening up Education*[5] was issued with the aim of fostering the integration of OER at any school level and in adult learning and with the aim of promoting learning across the life-span.

In the last few years, a number of communities have been established based on the OER philosophy and aimed at supporting this culture. An example is LangOER[6], a three-year European network which was created to foster linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe. They organize webinars and online events aiming at sharing materials and resources about multilingualism and cultural diversity.

4. ICT for CLIL

Our 21st millennium learners are constantly exposed to digital tools, as these are the main code of communication and interaction in their daily lives. That is why it is essential to rethink and reshape the teaching process in order to make learning more relevant and more effective. While planning and implementing lessons, teachers should take into account not only the development of students' 'communicative competence' (Canale & Swain, 1980), but also 'electronic communicative competence' (Simpson, 2005) or 'ICT competence' (Walker, 2007). Educational Technology applications and blended learning can facilitate Content and English Language Integrated Learning and contribute to the realization of the pedagogical, educational and language learning goals of CLIL (Vlachos, 2009). A large number of benefits are attributed to educational technologies, according to the relevant literature. Among many

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[4] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/open-educational-resources/what-are-open-educational-resources-oers/
[5] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0654
[6] http://langoer.eun.org/

others, students' active participation and self-expression and opportunities for authentic language use, using the target language in meaningful situations, student collaboration and socialization, working across the curriculum can be enumerated (Singhal, 1997, Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997).

Language teaching has recently seen an increasing interest in a new research area, TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning), which considers technology not as assisting language learning, but as a part of the environment in which language exists and is used. This is why there has been a shift from CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), which considers technological tools as merely instrumental to language learning, to TELL, which provides not only new tools, but also new educational contexts and settings (Walker & White, 2013).

The Web 2.0 offers many opportunities for students to use technology in an active way, becoming the real protagonists of their learning pathways, able not only to search and download information, but also to upload and share their own content, becoming authors, with their teachers acting as facilitators.

Thus, an important question is how to integrate the skills students develop through the Web 2.0 perspective (collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking) with the needed literacies (media, information, network, global literacies and digital citizenship). One answer comes through reconsideration of the concept of "fluencies": 21st Century Fluencies are not limited to technical prowess, but include critical thinking skills, essential to living in this multimedia world. We call them *fluencies for a reason*. Being literate means to have knowledge or competence. To be fluent is something more: it is to demonstrate mastery and to do so unconsciously and smoothly. The term 'fluencies' (Crockett et al., 2012) is significantly used within the 21st Century Fluency Project to include creativity, collaboration, knowledge of information, media fluencies and global citizenship[7]. As used in the language learning context, it refers to the development of 21st literacies and skills engendered through participation in a CLIL project.

5. Informal CLIL

Formal and informal learning have often been viewed as competing paradigms; however, students are increasingly adopting the tools and strategies for informal learning within formalized educational settings.

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[7] https://globaldigitalcitizen.org/21st-century-fluencies

Nowadays, bridging the gap between formal and informal learning has become crucial. The importance of a skilled and knowledgeable citizenry for Europe extends beyond formal education to learning acquired in non-formal or informal ways. Citizens must be able to demonstrate what they have learned in order to use this learning in their career and for further education and training. To do so, they must have access to a system which identifies, documents, assesses and certifies (that is, validates) all forms of learning. This is what the Council Recommendation of December 2012 has called upon Member States to put in place by 2018.

The "affordances" of students' informal practices may be extraordinary, if we consider the ways in which e-tools such as personal digital devices, communication tools and social networking can be used and how they can enhance processes of content and language integrated learning.

In the UK a study of students' experiences of technologies (Nicol, 2008) reports how learners usually use technologies and what impact they may have on learning: technologies often build the bridge to the school content; technologies are used in a pervasive, social and interactive way, and general ICT tools and resources are mixed with official course or institutional tools and resources. The study has also determined that students are developing new forms of evaluation skills and strategies (searching, restructuring, validating), which enable them to think critically and make decisions about a variety of sources and content. The use of these tools is changing the way students gather, use and create knowledge, shifting from lower to higher regions of Bloom's taxonomy, to make sense of their complex technologically enriched learning environment, exactly in the same way CLIL teaching and learning experiences can be carried out. Thus, a shift in focus from 'finding, locating and evaluating information' to 'using information, adopting knowledge and sharing of ideas' has to be adopted.

6. CLIL virtual communities

There is an urgent need for specific materials, resources and guidelines for content and language learning. An adequate selection of virtual communities of teachers and experts with a wide-experience of how to create CLIL content and the issues around CLIL can provide support to current and future CLIL education programs all over Europe, disseminating high quality and already proven materials and resources.

Reference to some of these communities and resources will be made below.

- *E-CLIL*[8] is a European Union funded project to develop and build resources and a resource centre for the use of Content Language Integrated Learning. It focuses on language learning, learning strategies, multilingualism and multiculturalism. The partners have built an "ECLIL Resource Centre", designed to link two types of Web resources: CLIL resource sites that either have more information on the use of CLIL or further links to more CLIL resources; specific CLIL resources that can be used by teachers in the classroom.

- *Pools-t*[9] (Producing Open Online Learning System - Tools) is a European project to develop tools for CLIL methodology as well as a guide on how to apply the tools in CLIL contexts. The project results and outputs are used by individual language learners, subject teachers adopting CLIL and language teachers preparing online teaching materials.

- *Clilstore*[10] is a store of copyleft content and language integrated teaching materials. It is being developed as part of the European funded TOOLS project. It uses *Wordlink*, a WWW based facility which links arbitrary webpages automatically, word by word with online dictionaries. *Wordlink*, in turn, uses *Multidict*, a multiple dictionary lookup facility that makes use of freely available online dictionaries. Both *Wordlink* and *Multidict* were developed as part of the European funded POOLS-T project (2008-2010) and their development is continuing as part of the present TOOLS project.

- *Tools*[11] (Tools for CLIL teachers) is a community that has developed a free online tool which enables media-rich webpages to be created for language learning. One of the core outcomes of the TOOLS project is a *CLIL Guidebook* showing how to exploit the online service (CLILstore) in a CLIL context. The book is available in many languages.

- *CCL* (CLIL Cascade Network)[12] is an on-line community of CLIL practitioners and their professional partners who share ideas, experiences, and resources. The website has different sections:

    i) The *Networking* area contains a contact database with a multifunction search facility allowing users to find opportunities for collaboration among schools,

[8] http://e-clil.uws.ac.uk/
[9] http://www.efvet.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=150&Itemid=221
[10] http://multidict.net/
[11] http://www.languages.dk/tools/
[12] http://www.ccn-clil.eu/index.php?name=Content&nodeIDX=3488

      teachers, researchers, teacher training providers or other stakeholders at national or transnational level.

ii) The *Materials and Resources* area allows users to share resources and good practices in CLIL and to explore the relationship between CLIL and the teaching of foreign, regional, minority or heritage languages.

iii) The *Professional Development* area involves setting up a CLIL teacher training community to design, develop and test teacher development frameworks, CLIL benchmarking tools and to foster the co-operation between teacher education providers aiming at joint CLIL competence building programs.

iv) *EVO – Electronic Village Online* is a TESOL international community that gathers teachers and educators from all over the world willing to share ideas and practices about the use of ICT in education in different issues, such as language teaching and CLIL (Cinganotto & Cuccurullo, 2016). Every year online training sessions are organized about different topics. They are free and attended by hundreds of teachers from all over the world.

Lifelong learning is essential to the promotion of 21st century fluencies. Learning communities, virtual environments and services that enable new forms of collaboration and knowledge sharing between users are critical features of educational programs. They enable communication among many people, can be used to give feedback and for peer evaluation, can support the personalizing learning agenda, can be used as a way of gathering and sharing teaching and learning resources or research data, and can provide new tools for the creation of knowledge in the CLIL perspective. Blended learning, which includes the Internet and the World Wide Web as integral components, has been shown to facilitate creative, higher order thinking skills and meaningful learning (Vlachos, 2006).

In the last few years, a number of ESL (English as a Second Language) and CLIL teachers' communities have appeared, using social networks and informal virtual environments to share ideas, best practices, and materials. These communities have engendered a new and informal professional development model whereby teachers discuss new ideas and share opinions in an informal way with colleagues from their own country and all over the world. These informal training opportunities provide an added value to the traditional and formal training pathways organized by universities or educational institutions.

7. Conclusions

The present paper was meant to provide insights about the use of technological tools and Open Educational Resources in the teaching/learning process, and to share the main features of the educational scenario in a CLIL class.

One aim of the paper was to describe the integration of formal and informal learning experiences, which is becoming popular among teachers. Open content, virtual learning environments, online training events, and virtual communities of practice are becoming increasingly important to teachers and educators who like to interact with their colleagues from all over the world, sharing and comparing ideas, materials, as well as best practices for language learning across the life-span. Some examples of communities were mentioned and briefly described in this paper, with the aim of highlighting how informal pathways may impact teachers' professional development.

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