The keeping of journals in CLIL contexts: How to make reflection by primary school teachers possible

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on experimental research on CLIL carried out as part of a PhD program at the Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Basilicata. The research project involved seven experimental primary school classes and seven control classes in the Lombardy region for two consecutive years. This paper examines the results of the qualitative analysis of the journals kept by the teachers throughout the process. That is, in order to have a better understanding of how each single CLIL project developed, teachers and pupils were required to keep a journal. Both of the journals were structured with a series of entries on which to reflect. This tool also provided subsidiary information which was extremely useful in explaining the results and revealing the teachers' and students' attitudes towards the CLIL approach. This paper may be useful for teachers and teacher trainers because it offers the possibility to consider the journal in different ways: as a pedagogical tool that promotes learning, as a methodological tool which gives an insight into CLIL experiences and as a professional tool which encourages the development of reflective thinking.

Key words: CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), journal, teachers' professional development, primary education, experimental research

Resumen

Este artículo se propone ilustrar los temas principales de una investigación experimental sobre el enfoque AICLE que ha sido desarrollado como parte de un programa doctoral en la Sapienza Universidad de Roma y en la Universidad de la Basilicata. Han participado en este proyecto de investigación durante dos años consecutivos siete clases experimentales y siete clases de control de primaria en la región de Lombardía. Este artículo examina los resultados del análisis cualitativo de los diarios que los docentes escribieron durante la investigación. Es decir, para entender la evolución de cada proyecto AICLE, se pidió a los docentes y a los alumnos que escribieran diarios.

Ambos tipos de diarios han sido organizados alrededor de una serie de preguntas. Este sistema ha proporcionado informaciones diversas, las cuales han sido muy útiles para explicar los resultados de la investigación y para ilustrar las actitudes de los alumnos y docentes hacia el método AICLE. Este artículo puede resultar interesante a los docentes y a los formadores de docentes porque ofrece la posibilidad de interpretar el diario de formas diversas: como un instrumento pedagógico que promociona el aprendizaje, como un instrumento metodológico que ilustra las experiencias del enfoque AICLE y como un instrumento profesional que favorece el desarrollo de pensamiento reflexivo.

Palabras clave: AICLE (Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras), diario, desarrollo profesional de los docentes, educación elemental, investigación experimental

1. Introduction

The practice of keeping a journal dates back to such a long time ago that it is not possible to state exactly when it first appeared. Lowenstein (1987: 87), who provided a fine chronological account of journal-writing, thought that "investigating the history of personal journal writing is akin to tracing the development of self-consciousness". Mallon (1984) identified seven groups of writers who used to keep a journal: chroniclers, travelers, pilgrims, creators, apologists, confessors, and prisoners.

It was in the twentieth century that the general population started to write journals as a vehicle of self-understanding and self-guidance. Thanks to the development of psychology and psychotherapy, people were encouraged to look inside themselves, to record behavior, dreams and feelings. In his *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, Carl Jung (1961) recorded his personal reflection and learning, applying lots of discoveries that he made about himself to his theories. In fact, many individuals involved in Jungian and related therapies started to be asked to write a journal as a part of the treatment.

There are also academic roots to journal-writing. Holly (1991) understood the importance of using journals in various professional development sectors, especially teacher education. Moreover, since Dewey (1933), different writers (Habermas 1971; Schön 1983, 1987; Kolb 1984; Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985) focussed on the theory and practice of reflection. In this sense, journal-keeping can represent a major contribution to reflect on one's own teaching in order to adopt a *reflective practice* (Moon 2006).

According to Postic and De Ketele (1988), one of the most effective experiential observation techniques used in educational contexts is represented by the journal, which is deemed as a wide container where activities carried out, goals, observations, difficulties and decisions may be recorded.

Keeping a journal allows teachers to compare their initial planning to what has been done, to certify an achieved goal and to easily connect the effects of learning to processes and to the initial starting point (Arnold, Benvenuto, Fabbri & Mansueti 2007).

As the journal is such an important pedagogic tool, we decided to confront a group of teachers and pupils involved in an experimental research project on CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) with the task of keeping a journal during their experience.

2. Journal-keeping in experimental research

The practice of keeping a journal in a CLIL context is not very widespread. As for the Italian context, the documented experiences refer mainly to journals kept by CLIL teachers and secondary school students (Coonan & Marangon 2007; Lucietto 2008).

In our case, the task of writing a journal was given to CLIL teachers and to primary school pupils involved in the experimental research project carried out at *Sapienza* University of Rome and at the University of Basilicata, as part of a PhD program in "Experimental Education". The teaching, through English, of part of the curriculum of different subjects (Art, History, Computer Science and Science) covered two school years (2007-2008 and 2008-2009) from the 4th to the 5th grade (Infante, Benvenuto & Lastrucci 2008).

This longitudinal experimental study involved seven experimental and seven control classes in the Lombardy region of Italy with a sample of about 280 pupils. A wide range of instruments was designed to assess the language and the contents as well as to provide a qualitative frame for the research (Infante, Benvenuto, Costa, & Lastrucci in press).

As for the journal kept by children, it was organized on the basis of a very simple structure. Some emoticons and short sentences to be completed were provided to make the journal easier to write. Children were asked to keep it throughout the whole experimentation and to fill it in at the end of each CLIL lesson. The entries were connected to the ones present in the teacher's journal so that a meticulous work of comparison could be carried out. In fact, we are interested in finding out if the elements perceived by the teachers as the most motivating and effective ones coincide with the students' point of view. The same analysis is conducted on the weak points and on the difficulties encountered throughout the experience.

In order to accomplish the analysis of the journals kept by the teachers, the aim of this paper, we considered the following indicators:

Quality of teaching: this referred to the kind of activities, strategies, techniques and assessment procedures adopted in this CLIL experimental research project;

Quality of reflection: this referred to the process of reflection on one's own teaching in the CLIL experimental research project.

3. The journal structure

According to Bolton (2005: 176), "*journals need to be carefully introduced and facilitated*". For this reason, apart from the face-to-face meeting during which the aims of the journal were carefully presented to teachers, the journal was accompanied by some instructions where the purpose was specified and where the reasons why the journal task was being set were explained. Moreover, the journal was provided in a precise format. There were a series of entries that allowed teachers to reflect on common elements so that comparison between different experiences could be carried out. This guided structure made the reflection easier by offering the same descriptors on which to reflect and guide teachers in order to cover particular topics. However, it was possible for them to add anything considered useful in a blank space.

This journal allowed the reconstruction of an experience in:
· an informative / narrative way when a precise description of what happened was required;
· a reflective way when teachers were asked to give a personal interpretation of what had happened.

As for the specific structure of the journal, it was made up of the following parts:

Part I: *Presentation form*: teachers were requested to fill in this form at the beginning of the CLIL experimental research. They were asked to briefly describe the class: the number of pupils, their interest and attendance rate, their general achievement level and particular situations worth specifying.

Part II: each one of the two sections that constituted this part needed to be filled in at the end of each CLIL lesson or at the end of a group of CLIL lessons having the same goal.

Section 1: *Description / Narration*: teachers were requested to illustrate the goals, content, methodology, materials and instruments adopted, class management and assessment procedures.

Section 2: *Reflection*: teachers were asked to answer a series of questions to encourage reflection. They concerned the planning, analysis and evaluation of CLIL teaching.

Some of the questions provided were:

Did you have to modify anything with respect to the original planning?

Did the pupils face any difficulties from the point of view of language learning?

Which activity was the most effective? Why?

Which were the strongest points in your lesson?

Which were the weakest points in your lesson?

Section 3: *Notes*: teachers could add anything considered useful to highlight aspects of the process that were not visible somewhere else.

For most of those who write journals, the primary purpose may usually be to record the experience and then to process it further (Brockbank & McGill 1998). Also in our case, the journal was designed with a dual immediate purpose: to collect further information beyond that gathered through the students' and teachers' questionnaires, and to have a wider view of each single CLIL project. This was possible through the objective recording of the experience by the CLIL teachers. However, there was also an extremely important goal that was meant to be achieved: offering a professional tool that could encourage the development of reflective thinking. In fact, apart from recording what was done, the teachers were asked to reflect on specific aspects of the process.

4. Results

The seven CLIL teachers organized the journal in a personal way, mixing up the different sections, and writing them up at the end of each single CLIL lesson or after a series of lessons aimed at achieving the same goal. Even if keeping a journal could be conceived of as a solitary activity, teachers sometimes answered the questions together with the content teacher. As for the type of register used, it was often formal. However, there were cases in which it was quite colloquial. In particular, one of the CLIL teachers often used exclamation marks and usually started a new page of the journal with interjections ("*Here I am!*", "*What an effort!*", "*We have started!*").

Apart from the relevance of the journal as a stimulus for reflection, it offered the possibility to summarize the topics, content and lexis useful for reconstructing what was developed in each CLIL context. Thus, the description of each CLIL experience was very important in order to obtain useful prompts for designing the content tests which would be delivered at the end of the experimental research. Some teachers were so detailed in explaining the contents and the objectives of their CLIL lessons that it was easy to reconstruct their experience. On the contrary, other teachers were more general and sometimes vague. This implied a bigger effort on the authors' part in designing coherent tests.

As for the narrative part of the journal, teachers specified how the class was organized. It revealed that the initial part of the lesson was generally frontal while the remaining part was arranged in pair and group work. As regards this latter aspect, almost all the teachers agreed in considering it a strong point of the CLIL approach. They stated that in CLIL lessons they organized pair and group work more often than in *traditional* lessons. In this way, "*the expert student helps the rest of the group with the English language and behaves as a stimulus for his/her classmates*". Moreover, pair work was considered very useful by the teachers in order to practice dialogues regarding the content topics. It represented an "*opportunity for everybody to use the specific lexis presented and to practise role-playing*".

In the literature (Coonan 2002; Serragiotto 2003; Benvenuto, Infante & Lastrucci, 2009), the lack of specific CLIL material is strongly emphasized. However, the teachers never complained about this aspect in their journal. On the contrary, they seemed to be satisfied by the fact that the material was mainly created by them. Images, pictures and photographs, mostly downloaded from the Internet, were used by teachers together with popup books, maps and diagrams. Some teachers prepared flashcards with the picture of specific lexis and another teacher used a flipchart which was extremely useful "*when children summarized everything they learned for their parents during a final show*". As for the assessment procedures, all the teachers checked the learning of their students at the end of each CLIL lesson through specific tests, labeling images, filling-in the blanks, drawing the missing parts and dramatizing. This last activity was especially used in the lessons of History and Art. The children simulated in pairs or in groups a pharaoh's death, a visit to the museum where Leonardo da Vinci's paintings are held and the archaeologists who succeeded in understanding the meaning of hieroglyphics.

As for the most motivating aspects of CLIL teaching, it was interesting to notice that teachers chose the activities defined as *creative* and *relaxing*. In particular, coloring flashcards to represent new vocabulary, making power point slides and inventing new hieroglyphics were some of the examples provided. Other activities that proved particularly motivating involved problem solving such as interpreting hieroglyphics, exchanging and understanding coded messages and building a sarcophagus and a pyramid. According to one of the seven teachers, speaking only English made pupils "*more attentive and keen to learn*" while in another teacher's opinion using only English could be "*frustrating for children*". The difficulty emphasized by the latter teacher may be explained by an in depth analysis of her journal and taking into account the class background and the results achieved at the end of the first year. In the part of the journal where the teachers were asked to present their classes before the experimental research, the teacher who considered the constant use of English to be positive stated that, in spite of the difficulties caused by the presence of foreign students who had recently settled in Italy and children with learning difficulties, her pupils "*enthusiastically take part in the activities*" and that the "*level achieved by my students is average to good*". On the contrary, in the same part of the journal, the teacher who considered the constant use of English to be frustrating said that "*it is not easy to work in this class*" and that "*there is tension among the pupils*". Moreover, she stated that some pupils' lack of motivation influenced the rest of the class' behavior.

Teachers identified activities and strategies that proved to be effective in teaching a subject through English. They all agreed on the fact that the use of pictures and visual aids helped students to learn better and retain new lexis longer. One of the teachers said, "*it is important for children to constantly link the content to its graphic representation (self-realized or found in books or on the internet)*". Moreover, going from what is close to the children's experience to more general knowledge was deemed as an effective strategy. For instance, one of the teachers asked her stu-

dents to make a cartouche, which is an enclosure with a horizontal line at the end, indicating that the hieroglyphics inside stand for a royal name. After making the cartouche with their names in hieroglyphics on it, pupils were shown a picture where Pharaoh Tutankhamon was wearing it as a pendant. The teacher stated that her pupils were very enthusiastic, felt like archaeologists, and were extremely proud of wearing an object like the one worn by a pharaoh. In the teacher's opinion, this experience rendered learning more meaningful because it was a "*concrete demonstration of what they learned*". Another teacher introduced the topic of pyramids by presenting specific monuments known by the pupils (such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and the Statue of Liberty) and compared them with the huge dimension of a pyramid. Also in this case, the teacher thought that the comparison between what the students were already familiar with and what was new to them "*was useful to make students reflect on the hard work carried out by the Egyptians when cranes and mechanical equipment did not exist*".

Teachers were requested to think about the initial planning of their lessons, compare it with the completed activities and answer a question to understand if anything had changed. Most of the answers were negative but in a few cases for each of the teachers the planning had changed. Only in one case did the change occur because a new activity was added. In the other cases, the time at the teachers' disposal was not enough to complete all the planned activities. This may be a clear signal that activities may proceed more slowly in a CLIL context than in a *traditional* setting. In this case, the journal was useful to reinforce the idea that planning is a process that occurs over a period of time instead of on one occasion and to realize that ideas can be modified or abandoned (Moon 2006).

Teachers also had to reflect on the difficulties that their pupils encountered concerning the use of the English language. Three teachers noticed that their pupils had difficulties during the first lessons because "*they felt "lost" in realizing that a subject content was taught through the English language".* These difficulties were also due to the unknown lexis that had to be conveyed by using images in order to avoid the use of Italian. On the other hand, a teacher complained about the fact that "*once new structures and vocabulary, it is problematic for children to use them in everyday conversation because they are very specific*".

Apart from pair and group work, strong points of the CLIL experience could be found in creating a setting promoting involvement and organizing concrete activities to "*build learning together*". With regards to this latter point, one of the teachers, who taught Science through English, said that experiments on water evaporation and condensation implied "*a hard work of simplification of the CLIL target language*".

As for CLIL's weak points, it seemed that the main difficulties were connected to the difficulties in managing the students when they were involved in practical activities. In their journals, teachers often complained that it was hard to keep them calm when performing because "*everyone wanted to do everything*", when cutting out templates and when carrying out practical activities. As already reported above, some other teachers also complained because the time at their disposal was never enough to complete what was planned. According to another teacher, it was "*really difficult to involve foreign students who have recently settled in Italy and children with learning difficulties*". In particular, this teacher records this difficulty in all her lessons. Comparing this sentence with the part of the journal where she presents the class, these children "*disturb the rest of the class. They don't respect the basic rules of politeness and their families aren't interested in this issue*".

As we have noticed so far, the journals kept by the teachers appeared to be useful repositories of impressions, ideas and opinions about their experience in particular and about the CLIL approach in general. They provided the means of critically looking back on their experiences, high-

lighting strong and weak points, the most and the least effective activities and the pros and cons of the CLIL approach. What is necessary to underline is the interpretations that teachers gave to what was done while developing the CLIL experimental research. The presence of specific questions to be answered made the teachers reflect on crucial aspects of their teaching and to foresee possible improvements in their didactic approaches. In fact, when stating that time was not enough to develop all the planned activities, the teachers saw a possible solution for their future CLIL experiences in planning fewer activities because in a CLIL context it is necessary to "*reduce activities*", "*there is not enough time to develop lots of activitie*s", "*there is no time to expand each aspect of the proposed topic*". Moreover, teachers added some notes to focus on elements that were not analyzed in other parts of the journal. What is interesting to notice is that most of the teachers pointed their attention to the reactions of the children to this "*new way of teaching*". "*Enthusiasm*" is the most recurrent word in the teachers' final impressions. One of the signs of the students' increasing interest was demonstrated by the quantity of material they brought to school about the CLIL topic and also by their growing interest in the target discipline

5. Conclusions

The journal undoubtedly offered teachers the chance to carefully describe their CLIL teaching in each single context, allowing the reconstruction of the process and of the experience. The presence of such a structure has helped the teachers to reflect on appropriate issues and the researchers to circumscribe their analysis. The main benefit of the journal was represented by the possibility to explore not only the teacher's personal experience, such as the actions and decisions undertaken, but also the students' point of view. Teachers also focused on what children felt, thought and did throughout the entire process, trying to interpret these aspects and to offer a possible solution to some issues that are perceived as obstacles to the correct development of CLIL teaching.

As generally happens to teachers involved in CLIL programs (Infante, Benvenuto & Lastrucci 2009), they learn to plan, to act and to teach differently. In their journals, CLIL teachers were able to focus on the differences compared to their *traditional* way of teaching and to motivate some of the decisions undertaken. They reflected on their teaching, offering possible solutions to difficulties and emphasizing positive and negative aspects.

Teachers used the journal as a tool for focusing on specific issues, for keeping analytical notes and for recording the process and the interaction with pupils.

By reading the journal of each single teacher, the development of each CLIL process clearly emerged. The journal was a fundamental key for the comprehension of specific matters and for helping to delineate what worked and what was less effective in each single approach. It surely helped develop 'reflective practitioners' who gave rise to new ideas starting from the reflections on the different dimensions of their teaching. It also enhanced their critical analysis of what they were experiencing as CLIL teachers.

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