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a cura di Paolo E. Balboni *e* Carmel M. Coonan

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Indice

9. Challenges Teaching Content through English: Language Abilities and Strategic Competences

by *Geraldine Ludbrook*

Italian subject teachers who set out to teach their subject in English within the CLIL framework have a dual focus to their teaching: to explain their content subject and to focus on the students' foreign language skills. As subject specialists they are familiar with the disciplinary contents of their courses. Problems may arise, however, when they turn to the issue of supporting their students' English language needs.

CLIL teachers are expected to be able to design CLIL courses, and to select and adapt teaching materials to make the subject content more accessible to students of different levels of language proficiency. They scaffold their students' language in the CLIL classroom, creating comprehensible input for learners by employing communication strategies such as slower speech, or the use of repetition, reformulation, and exemplification, and the use of interaction strategies. CLIL teachers also provide students with corrective feedback to stimulate student foreign language production. Finally, they assess their students, deciding on the appropriate balance in the evaluation between foreign language and subject content.

It is clear from this list of CLIL teacher competences that they require considerable awareness of the students' language level and the potential difficulties they face when learning a content subject through a foreign language. Subject teachers are not foreign language teachers. Nevertheless, working within the CLIL approach, subject teachers are also foreign language learners themselves. As such they have a strong advantage that comes from their own language training, and they have a clear first-hand idea of the difficulties Italian students encounter when learning English. This chapter sets out to examine those features of the English language that may create particular problems for Italian learners so that teachers can focus on aspects specifically useful for Italian teachers teaching a content subject in English to Italian students.

Although subject teachers working within the CLIL framework are not foreign language teachers, their knowledge and use of the foreign language needs to be well formed to provide learners with an appropriate language model, which

involves features such as intelligibility, fluency, and accuracy. The language features examined here will therefore also serve as a guide to CLIL teachers to focus and monitor their own foreign language competence, as well as reflecting on the language they require for the effective implementation of the CLIL approach.

9.1. General English

9.1.1. Phonology

English is a stress-timed language, unlike Italian, which is syllable timed. In English word stress, each multisyllabic word has one syllable with primary stress, one syllable may have secondary stress, and the remaining syllables will be unstressed. In Italian, instead, syllables tend to have the same weight, and vowels are always fully pronounced. The stress patterns of words therefore need to be pronounced clearly to ensure comprehensibility. Moreover, different stress patterns may alter the meaning of the word (compare *'ex-ploit*, adventure and *to ex'ploit*, to take advantage) or change the category of the word (compare the noun *'record* with the verb *to re'cord*).

Pitch (the raising and lowering of the voice while speaking) and intonation (the use of pitch to convey finer shades of meaning) are also important aspects of English phonology. As English has few inflections and a relatively fixed word order, it uses intonation to convey grammatical information or focus on elements in the sentence. Italian speakers of English therefore sometimes find difficulty in using intonation to mark important information and instead tend to either shift syntactic elements around in the sentence, or use other linguistic devices to mark the focus of the discourse.

In the specific context of the CLIL classroom, the teacher is expected to use a series of communication strategies to scaffold the students' language. Many of these strategies rely on intonation. For example, when giving feedback, in order to avoid direct correction and encourage the student to seek an alternative form, the teacher may partially repeat what a student has just said using rising intonation:

S: Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo led to her final fall from power.
T: HER?
S: His fall.

This technique signals to the student, and to the entire class, that the element that has been marked through intonation needs to be replaced. In other terms, the teacher's strategic use of intonation focuses attention on that particular element and not the elements placed before or after it.

Another example of the strategic use of intonation to elicit further student language production:

S: The value of pi is 3.1.
T: RIGHT?
S: 41592.

If the word *right* is said with a rising pitch, it is likely to be heard as a question or as an invitation to a speaker to continue, while a falling pitch is more likely to be heard as confirmation or agreement.

It is therefore clear that an awareness of English stress patterns, intonation and pitch play an important role in the CLIL classroom. The strategic use of these elements of the English language by the teacher help implement the principles of CLIL methodology: comprehensible language input for the students and effective strategies for encouraging student production. Students' perception of the nuances conveyed is important both for their listening comprehension and in their production of natural-sounding speech. It also assists in focusing their attention to the accuracy of their language and stimulates their production.

9.1.2. Pronunciation

Pronunciation of individual sounds is another key aspect of phonological competence that if not sufficiently mastered will affect the speaker's intelligibility. Here, too, the differences in the sound systems of English and Italian lead to specific difficulties.

Italian learners of English typically find pronouncing the vowel sounds problematic, in particular the substitution of most unstressed vowels with the neutral schwa /ə/ sound, tending to pronounce the vowel as it is spelled. In the word *postman*, for example, the stressed /æ/ sound found in *man* is replaced with the unstressed /ə/. The schwa sound is the most common vowel sound in spoken English and mispronouncing it has a severe impact on the speaker's intelligibility.

Other vowel sounds also cause problems, due to the fact that Italian has only seven basic vowel sounds compared to the twenty standard vowel sounds in English. This is especially evident in the case of minimal pairs. For example, the difference between the short /ɪ/ in *ship* and the long /i:/ in *sheep* or between the vowels in *run* /rʌn/ and *ran* /ræn/.

The pronunciation of consonants include the predictable difficulties with words containing the letters *th*, which are pronounced /θ/ as in *thin* and *length*, or /ð/ as in *this* and *other*. As these sounds do not exist in Italian, they are often

mispronounced as /t/ and /d/. Italian also does not have the aspirated /h/ sound, which is often omitted in English words such as *house* or *hill*, although this is sometimes hyper-corrected by the addition of an aspirated /h/ to words beginning with a vowel. The generally unpronounced /r/ sound in British English is often replaced by Italian speakers with the rhotic or rolled /r/ of Italian.

Awareness of how the different sound systems of English and Italian affect the way individual sounds are pronounced will help the Italian CLIL teacher improve the intelligibility of the input they produce in the classroom. Attention to the Italian learners' pronunciation will also ensure that their L2 accent in English does not interfere with their ability to make themselves understood.

9.1.3. Orthography

English and Italian orthographies differ greatly. English has a highly inconsistent match between the 26 graphemes and the 44 phonemes of its writing and sound systems, whereas Italian has a close match between letters and sounds. This results in many inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation as many sounds are spelled using different or multiple letters. The vowel sound in *he*, for example, can be spelled in a number of different ways: *seat*, *seem*, *ceiling*, *people*, *chimney*, *machine*, *siege*, *phoenix*, *lazy*.

The inconsistency in the English spelling system creates a series of groups of words in which spelling and pronunciation can be problematic. Homographs are words that share the same spelling even though they are pronounced differently: *to wind* and *wind* or *to close* and *close*. Homophones are words that share the same pronunciation even though they are spelled differently: *to*, *too*, *two*, and *there*, *their*, *they're*.

The CLIL teacher has to be able to provide an adequate model of orthographic competence for the students, with generally accurate spelling, especially in boardwork and handouts. The CLIL teacher must also have sufficient knowledge of the English spelling system to be able to predict the students' difficulties and monitor and assess their written production.

9.1.4. Grammar and

In the CLIL approach, grammar is not taught separately, but rather emerges from the language needed for the **leaning #learning?#** of the disciplinary subject. Grammar rules are not explicitly taught and practised. Grammar structures and functions emerge from the meaning-oriented context in which learners are exposed to the specific language of the content subject. The approach builds on the

competences the learners' already possess, providing them with large inputs of authentic language. The role of the CLIL teacher is to provide learners with the opportunity to notice grammar structures and forms, to infer the rule in context, to learn how to use it, and finally to gradually extend the structure to other more general contexts. The CLIL teacher therefore needs to have a good working knowledge of the language underlying the content in their own disciplinary field and awareness of the potential difficulties that learners may have if it is beyond their current language competence.

Accuracy in the CLIL classroom often takes second place to fluency and communication skills, and mistakes are seen as a natural process in language acquisition. Nevertheless, it is important for the CLIL teachers to acquire and maintain a high degree of grammar accuracy for various different reasons. Firstly, they must be able to provide a model of well-formed language for the students, structuring their discourse to make it clearly comprehensible for learners. Secondly, in order to expose CLIL **#students#** ~~**learners**~~ to the naturally-occurring grammatical features of their content subject they must have control of the features themselves so as to provide fruitful feedback for learners. Thirdly, as one feature of the scaffolding support that the CLIL teacher is expected to provide for learners consists in modifying authentic texts, restructuring them to make them more accessible to learners, they need sufficient grammar skills to perform this reorganisation effectively. Finally, and importantly, the CLIL teacher is responsible for the assessment of the learners' language, albeit in a more holistic perspective than in the foreign language classroom.

As the CLIL teachers **#are#** ~~**is**~~ also ~~**a**~~ learner**#s#** of the foreign language through which they are teaching their disciplinary subject, they will be aware of what the principle difficulties of grammar and syntax facing the Italian **#students#** ~~**learner**~~. Research has shown that the features of General English that are most problematic for Italian learners, even at advanced levels, are the tense system, the use of the articles and the question forms.

The difference between the two tense systems lies principally in the fact that unlike Italian, which has inflected tense forms for the present, simple past, imperfect, future and conditional, English has only two basic tenses: the present and past. All other tenses are supplied by modal auxiliaries such as *will*/*would*, or by verb phrases such as *be* + *going to*. English verbs have two aspects: the progressive aspect expresses a temporary event or state; the perfect aspect refers to duration of time to the present or the present result of a past event. These differences lead to interference errors such as *Leonardo has painted La Giaconda between 1503 and 1506*, or *He studies English since 2010*.

Italian learners frequently have problems with the correct use of articles in English as, although the definite and the indefinite article exist in both lan-

guages, their use often does not correspond. In English, the use of articles (definite and indefinite) depends on two basic factors: the class of noun they precede (singular, plural, uncountable), and whether reference is generic or specific. This is simpler than the Italian system in which gender and number agreement are necessary, yet learners often transfer article use with results such as *I am studying the literature*. Article errors do not generally interfere with understanding; however, a text with article errors in every sentence becomes more difficult to read.

The syntactical issue of question formation is another problematic area. Whereas in Italian interrogation is generally expressed with intonation alone, English has two basic structural patterns for interrogation: Yes/No question inversion **#(***Are you English?***)#** and content questions using a *wh-* interrogative word (*who*, *what*) at the beginning of the sentence **#(***What is the capital of France?***)#.** Difficulties can arise through the use of the *do*/*does*/*did* auxiliary verb, resulting in forms such as *What you like?* Nevertheless, intelligibility is rarely hindered by such non-standard forms.

However, in the interactive language of the CLIL classroom, the role of strategic questioning takes on an extremely important role. The most common form of question that is used in the content subject classroom is the closed question, for example *Does 2 plus 2 equal 4?* This form of question is quick and easy to answer as possible responses can be one-word answers, such as *yes*/*no*, *true/false*. They are questions to which the content teacher knows the answer and are used to check for student understanding and knowledge of the topic in question.

In the CLIL approach the teacher's role is to attempt to stimulate authentic language production by learners. One strategy that is encouraged is the use of open questions, such as *Can you explain what you mean? What is the most important idea in this text?* This form of question can prompt multiple and sometimes conflicting answers, and is often the most effective in **#promoting?# ~~encouraging~~** discussion and active learning in the classroom, creating space for learner language output.

CLIL teaching also requires the frequent use of procedural questions. These are questions that support classroom management and routines to ensure a smooth running of the teaching process. Examples of procedural questions are: *Do you understand? Have you done your homework?*

The CLIL teacher therefore needs to have a good command of questions forms in English. They also need to have awareness of the strategic use of different question forms and learn how to use them effectively to stimulate learner output.

9.2. Academic English

The CLIL classroom is an academic environment and the language used by both teachers and students in classroom instruction provides learners with the knowledge and skills needed to access content associated with a particular discipline. The CLIL teacher is the primary source of academic English for **#students#** ~~**learners**~~ where the teacher is required to have the sociolinguistic competence, as well as the language competence, to shift register between the informal, personal language that is used before and after the lesson, and the formal, more structured language of the subject discipline being studied.

The features of academic English may vary from one discipline to another; however, there are some common features. Academic English uses more complex vocabulary than everyday speech, tending to replace phrasal verbs with their more formal, usually Latinate, counterparts (e.g. *to put up with* and *to tolerate*). Academic vocabulary is made up of non specialised words that are used across content areas (e.g. *illustrate, however, assert*). These words are not unique to a particular discipline and are frequently encountered in a wide range of contexts. In addition English has general words that can take on specialist meaning in academic contexts. For example, the word *degree*, which in the field of education refers to an academic title, in science is a division of a temperature scale, **#while#** ~~**and**~~ in geometry indicates a unit of angle measurement.

Specialized, or technical content-area words that are used in specific academic disciplines (e.g. *fulcrum*, *organism*, *rectangle*) often require the most instructional time and attention because they are unfamiliar to most students and contain ideas important to specific subject areas. However, CLIL teachers are experts in their own disciplinary subject and, as such, are generally familiar with the specialist English of their subject.

An important feature of academic writing in English is the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging". Cautious language enables the writer**#s#** to report the limits of their findings while protecting themselves from the risk of error. Hedging makes use of modal verbs (*may*, *might*, *could*, *can*) to introduce different shades of uncertainty: *The results might be interesting.* Impersonal clauses using the pronouns *it* are also commonly found in this kind of writing: *It may be possible*, *It could be the case.*

Impersonal writing is very important in academic English and the passive voice is a useful tool to achieve an impersonal style. Passive constructions, introduced by *it*, are commonly found in formal and scientific English to express impersonal concepts and to report statements or information: *It was predicted that the experiment would be succeed.* Agentless passives are common in scientific writing where the agent may be irrelevant: *The mixture was heated to 300°C.*

One feature of academic English that is particularly salient to the CLIL classroom is signposting.

In academic English, especially in academic writing, the author is responsible for making the text as clear as possible for the reader. This involves the use of signposting language to signal **#him#** ~~**to the reader**~~ the key aspects, such as purpose, structure, main points, direction of the argument, conclusions. Examples of such written signposting are: *This paper begins by...*; *It will then go on to...*; *In conclusion…* Other words and phrases are used to list items (*firstly… secondly*, *… finally*), give examples (*for example*, *for instance*), reformulate ideas (*in other words*, *to put it simply*, *that is*), or indicate result (*therefore*, *thus*, *as a result*, *consequently*), to mention just a few.

In the CLIL classroom, the teacher is expected to make the input for learners as comprehensible as possible. They will require knowledge of written signposting language when modifying authentic texts to aid learner**#'s#** comprehension. In addition, they will need to be able to use clear signposting strategies in their classroom teaching in order to assist **#students#** ~~**learners**~~ to make connections between ideas, and to signal transition between one topic and the next: *First we'll carry out the experiment, then we'll write a report*, for example.

Language plays a central role in the teaching of any disciplinary subject. It is the role of the CLIL subject specialist to promote interaction where pupils jointly construct and negotiate their understanding of subject-specific use of language and ways of constructing knowledge.

9.3. Conclusions

This brief discussion of features of the English language that commonly create difficulties for Italian learners has a twofold purpose. Firstly, to encourage CLIL teachers to acquire greater awareness of the potential difficulties their students face when learning through English, drawing on their own experience as English language learners and using error analysis to help focus their attention on the language aspects of their CLIL teaching. Secondly, to point to the strategic importance that certain characteristics of the English language have when implementing the communicative pedagogies available for effective CLIL teaching.

The challenges facing Italian CLIL teachers working through English are manifold. CLIL teachers should not, however, be discouraged if they feel uncertain about their English language skills. Their ability to use their own language learning experience and their familiarity with their students' difficulties, coupled with effective communication skills in the target language, are of greater importance than native speaker, or near speaker language proficiency.

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