

Carmel Mary Coonan
(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)

CLIL AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY: DESIRABLE? POSSIBLE?

1. Internationalisation of Higher Education

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the possible relationship between CLIL (content and language integrated learning) and English-medium instruction in higher education. The language issue in particular is focussed upon from the perspective of the lecturer and the student.

Historically, the phenomenon of an international dimension in higher education existed in the Middle Ages – the so-called ‘medieval European education space’ (de Wit/ Hunter 2015: 42). This waned with the rise of the nation states to pick up again in the early 20th century, albeit on a small scale. Today, the phenomenon is growing fast resulting from the forces of globalisation that have set in motion processes such as cooperation, and also competition, between universities and the creation of national and international bodies responsible for organising, supporting and overseeing the process.

The process has gathered momentum in Europe over the last twenty years. Instrumental in this has been not only the Maastricht Treaty and the Schengen Agreement in the ‘90s, but also the Bologna Process leading to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to promote international cooperation between universities and academic exchange between students and staff.

The definition of ‘internationalisation’ has changed over time. Today, in the new millennium, it is defined as:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (de Wit/ Hunter/ Coelen 2015: 283).

The definition captures a movement now underway that is concerned not only with the macro organisational, top-down, aspects of internationalisation (funding, structures, laws aimed at making internationalisation an integrated part of the system), but also with the local level that concerns internationalisation of the curriculum and the actual delivery of programmes. The definition above captures the concern that internationalisation develop from being an experience for a fortunate few to becoming an experience for all. It is the concept of ‘Internationalisation at home’, defined as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen/ Jones 2015 cited in de Wit/ Hunter/ Coelen 2015: 286).

1.1. English-taught programmes (ETPs)

A phenomenon that has developed in relation to internationalisation is that concerning English-taught programmes (ETPs). In fact, English has now become the main language of communication and the main medium of instruction in the internationalisation process (the

expression also used with reference to ETPs, which captures the *instructional* dimension, is ‘English-medium instruction’ (EMI), cf. Coleman 2006).

Wächter/ Maiworm (2014: 55-56) list six reasons that institutions state as the purpose for setting up ETPs. Two reasons are most frequently mentioned by southern European institutions: reason a. “abolition of language obstacles for the enrolment of foreign students”; reason b. “improvement of international competences of domestic students [...] by making domestic students ‘fit’ for global/international labour markets”. It is clear therefore that, although late in developing a response to the need for internationalisation, southern European countries - including Italy - embrace the goal of ‘internationalisation at home’.

There has been an exponential increase of ETPs in Europe. In the period 2001 “English medium-instruction was a rare phenomenon” (Wächter/ Maiworm: 27). By 2014 the increase was enormous, with the number growing from 2,389 in 2007 to 8,089 (+239%) in 2014. The steepest increase in that period (+866%) was in southwest Europe (Italy, France, Spain, Portugal) (Wächter/ Maiworm: 48)¹. With reference to Italy, the CRUI survey in 2012 (Breno/ Carfagna/ Cavallini 2012)² involving all 81 of its member universities highlighted the fact that “più del 70% degli atenei (57) nel 2011/12 ha erogato un’offerta formativa in lingua inglese, per un totale di 671 corsi³, distribuiti in diverse tipologie di proposta”. The CRUI Report also states that the tendency is destined to increase so today – 2016 – we can expect the situation to be more widespread.

2. CLIL concept

Although much has been written about CLIL (cf. Cenoz/ Genesee/ Gorter 2014, Bruton 2013), it is not generally used with reference to Higher Education. However, in the light of the implications deriving from reasons a and b mentioned above, it might be useful to explore the potential of the CLIL principles to understand their usefulness for EMI issues.

The four words of the acronym - content and language integrated learning - refer to a natural process where cognition, language and world knowledge acquisition develop naturally through each other (Vygotsky 1978, Halliday 1993). So why the need for the CLIL acronym? It must be remembered that the acronym was coined with reference to foreign language medium instruction situations where the natural process referred to above is skewed because of the discrepancy between individual foreign language competence and the level of cognitive and academic engagement required. The risk is that the discipline goals be hampered through linguistic inadequacy, e.g., limited specialistic lexical knowledge which might contribute to slower input processing. Thus, the CLIL acronym calls our attention to the need to purposefully create the conditions for discipline content learning to take place. The acronym also calls our attention to the other aspect – *language learning* – reminding us that language learning is part of the process and therefore needs to be taken care of. So there are two issues for EMI: to remove the language obstacles to academic content learning and to ensure (foreign language) learning as well.

3. The language issue in delivering courses in English

The idea that, by offering ETPs, you are removing language obstacles to the enrolment of foreign students (reason a. above) is only one aspect of the issue. Given that English is a foreign language for the majority of these students, this medium of instruction, precisely because it is a foreign language and not the mother tongue, may pose obstacles to actual learning, for both foreign and domestic students alike. Furthermore, when reason b. talks of making domestic students ‘fit’ for

¹ South European countries are still at the bottom of the ranking despite the steep growth rate since 2007.

² La Fondazione CRUI, *Course Offerings in English delivered by Italian Universities* a.y. 2011/12: document available at: <http://www2.crui.it/HomePage.aspx?ref=2094#>.

³ This figure does not include single courses taught in English but which are part of a curriculum taught in Italian.

the global/international labour markets, this must surely include improving their English proficiency⁴.

Thus, EMI has a language issue to face and in order to draw some conclusions about the usefulness of associating CLIL with these EMI situations, we look at the issue from the perspective of both the lecturer and the student.

a. The lecturer

A characterising feature of all EMI situations is that English is used as a lingua franca for communication between people who speak it as a second or foreign language (Kachru/ Kachru/ Nelson 2006). In the EMI situations in Italy, both lecturer and student, with few exceptions, will speak it as a foreign language with each other. What immediately appears as a potential problem in this respect is the issue of intelligibility and comprehensibility and, thus, the communicative effectiveness of lectures (Becker/ Kluge 2014). Research shows that aspects of non-native language use that most impact, negatively, on intelligibility and comprehensibility in lectures are not grammatical errors but pronunciation errors (Valcke/ Pavòn 2015): mispronunciation of vowel sounds, mispronunciation of consonants, incorrect use of stress, ineffective use of intonation. There is a higher level of hesitations, silence fillers, and false starts; speech rate is slower and language tends to be more formal. In addition, lecture meta-discourse (so important in rendering lecturing effective) suffers, e.g., lecturers provide fewer examples, fewer reformulations, fewer re-phrasings, fewer asides and omit overt signalling of discourse organisation such as repetition, using linking talk, summarising and questioning (cfr. Björkman 2010, Björkman 2011, Gotti 2014, Jenkins 2011, Mauranen 2010, Pérez/ Arnó/ Macià 2002, Pilkinton-Pihko 2010). Moreover, research has also shown that the pressure of having to teach through a non-mother tongue has a blocking effect on body language (Airey 2011) – another important part of the effectiveness of communication. It is easy to recognise that these critical aspects are the manifestation of a difficulty in managing teaching through a non-native language. It is unfortunate that it is precisely these aspects that have the highest positive impact for learning, especially in a non-native language. Given the relevance of language in teaching/lecturing, attention needs to be dedicated to it, so as to guarantee optimal learning conditions, especially in EMI situations. It implies that the EMI lecturer be sensitive to language issues and linguistically enhance his teaching to facilitate student learning. Such considerations imply a CLIL orientation.

b. The student

We would now like to reflect on EMI and the language issue from the student perspective. An investigation⁵ involving a group of students (n. 62 of whom n. 9 non-native speakers of Italian) attending a first-year single course delivered in English as part of a first-level foreign language and literature degree were asked why they had chosen to follow the English-taught course instead of following the parallel Italian-taught course. The great majority mentioned language gains (“opportunity to learn English”: 85%) followed by “opportunity to learn specific terms of the subject” (18%), “challenge myself” (13%), “more interesting” (11%). “Involvement in an international environment” was mentioned only once. As these were for the most part domestic students, it is interesting to see how clear their focus is – they see the EMI courses as an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency. Evidence (Jensen 2013) shows that students’ perceptions of the potential of ETPs to support the development of their English proficiency is

⁴ It is important to understand that ETPs are not English language teaching (ELT) programmes. The aim of ETPs is not to teach English but, in line with CLIL principles, to create the conditions for it to be learnt.

⁵ We refer here to a small-scale internal investigation conducted by the author of this paper to ascertain the reactions and perceptions of the students attending an English-taught course with a view to adjusting and perfecting methodological-didactic aspects. The data were collected through a questionnaire containing four closed and five open-ended questions. The responses were grouped according to themes and the number of times each respondent made reference to any of them was counted. Reference is made here to only two of the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. The results of the investigation are not published.

linked to their perceptions of the lecturer's English proficiency. In fact, when this is faulty, they view it as detrimental. This is because the students' basic ideology is the native-norm and this explains their criticisms when the lecturer's English proficiency falls short of it. In addition, the students' perceptions of the lecturer's language proficiency also colours their views of how well s/he teaches. Research shows that "students' attitudes towards the lecturer's lecturing competence are affected by their perceptions of the lecturer's proficiency in English" and these views have been shown to impact on their end of course evaluations (Jensen 2013). Thus, in ETPs it would appear that the students want to learn English and they want the best conditions for it.

A second question concerned the students' ability to 'function' during the EMI lecture. They were invited to indicate i. what they found difficult about a lecture in English and ii. to make suggestions for improvement. Answers differed according to (self-declared) language proficiency level. Concerning sub-question i, for C1/C2-level students the most common answer was 'nothing'. Brief mention is made of difficulty in grasping the meaning of new words and in catching key words because of the noisy environment. For B2/B1/A2-level students, the situation changes quite considerably. Even though some B2-level students say they don't encounter any problems, a level lower than C1 seems to heighten student difficulty. The problems mentioned at these levels concern attention (mentioned only by B2 level students): difficulty in "concentrating throughout the whole lesson"; the need for "constant and greater attention", "one cannot get distracted at all because to miss just one word means missing the meaning of the message overall"; language knowledge (mentioned by all): mostly non-knowledge of specific terms which means that the words are not recognised; and procedural matters: mostly involving note-taking which has to be done while listening at the same time - not being able to recognise words slows down the whole process.

As for suggestions for improvement (sub-question ii), two aspects are highlighted: a. lecture presentation strategies where the main suggestion is to use slides (or blackboard) to present specific key terms ("helps word recognition", "don't lose time to look up in a dictionary", "compensates for background noise")⁶; and b. student participation: the students want to be drawn more into the learning process ("speak more between ourselves", "read articles in English", "write short articles in English on specific issues", "do projects to carry out in groups").

With reference to the language issue therefore, it is clear that EMI situations create specific needs for students and that the students see in EMI the possibility to better their language proficiency. The question is whether the lecture styles and strategies are able to meet these needs and aspirations. In our view, CLIL might be able to provide some useful solutions.

4. CLIL in higher education: desirable? Possible?

CLIL developed with reference to foreign language medium programmes in the mainstream school system and so has acquired certain associations with this level of instruction. Also a good part of research and reflection concerns this reality. However, there is a lot within the concept that might be considered in the light of the language-related issues of ETPs in higher education. CLIL calls for language and learning to be seen as a single process: in order to learn, language must not be an obstacle; in order to learn, language needs to be used as an instrument of thought and meaning-making; in order to *show* learning, language is generally necessary; in order to show *effective* learning, language should be appropriate to the discipline. This draws our attention to aspects such as presentation strategies for comprehensibility and communicative effectiveness, learning task types and language use, the language of the discipline (e.g., subject literacies) and related objectives, assessment strategies for language in disciplinary learning, etc. In other words, an ETP is not merely a programme taught in another language. It is a programme that brings with it a promise for the students and for the institution itself. Thus, to ensure its effectiveness, the CLIL concept may not only be useful but possibly desirable (this does not mean that the actual label needs

⁶ The lecturer had removed the use of slides after the first lesson in the conviction that by doing so students would be more able to concentrate on their listening.

to be used, associated, as it is, with school⁷). A language-sensitive ETP recognises the problematical nature of the language dimension by elaborating language-enhanced objectives, methodology and assessment procedures. The question is how to make this possible. Research shows that in most institutions in Europe, lecturers invited to deliver ETPs do not benefit from any kind of preparation – either linguistic or methodological (Airey 2011). Without support and guidance, the hoped-for effects of ETPs will be weak. So some kind of training, in sync with the ‘distinctiveness’ of the university world, may be necessary. This requirement for training is in line with recent indications of the European Higher Education Area (E4 GROUP 2015)⁸ and High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education of the European Commission (2013)⁹ calling for the modernisation of Higher Education. Training in CLIL-informed practices for EMI may contribute to this.

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⁷ For a discussion of the issues concerning the integration of content and language (key element in the CLIL concept) at university level, see cf. Wilkinson et al, 2004; Wilkinson, Zegers, 2007; Wilkinson, Zegers, 2008, Wilkinson, Walsh, 2015.

⁸ Document available at: http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf.

⁹ See also European Commission Press Release: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13554_en.htm?locale=en.

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