

Providing language support in CLIL

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1. The need for language support

Teaching and learning in a second language (L2) is not the same as teaching and learning in the first (L1). It is true that we should not paint a complex picture of teaching in a L2, and many subject teachers can teach in this way without too much extra training. But there are some new things which subject teachers will have to learn before they start teaching bilingually. The main thing is how to give language support.

Students learning in a L2 are doing more things, cognitively speaking, than they do if they are learning through their L1. They are learning subject-matter knowledge and skills, but they are also concurrently learning the language which is the vehicle for that subject-learning. This means that they have less mental processing capacity than when learning through the L1. They cannot therefore do some classroom tasks without help. Teachers can give help where it is necessary either by making the task conceptually easier, so that the students can focus more on language; or they can make it linguistically easier so that the students can focus more on the concepts. It is not a good idea to make tasks conceptually easier very often: students – and other stakeholders such as parents and teachers – may get the idea that CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is too easy and not as good as the L1-medium version. So teachers need to learn the skill of providing language support. At what points in a lesson they need to do that, and how they can do it are the subject of this article.

2. What do students need help with?

One of the main aspects of providing language support is the analysis of the cognitive and language demands of lessons. CLIL teachers need to do this routinely in their lesson planning. What it

means is that teachers ask themselves several questions:

- What cognitive processes will the students will be engaging in?
- What aspects of language will this require them to use?
- Which of these aspects of language will they find difficult?
- How can the teacher provide support for these aspects of language?

2.1 The cognitive demands of lessons

Here are some common examples of cognitive processes which teachers and students engage in:

- A teacher is going to present a new topic starting with an oral presentation
- S/he may want the students later to read a rather complex text in the L2 on this topic
- S/he wants the students to work in small groups at some point and classify some of the new concepts
- S/he wants them to write a short piece on the new concepts.

2.2 The language demands of lessons

What aspects of language will these activities require the learners to use? Firstly, they will need to listen carefully and follow the sequence of ideas in the teacher's presentation. To do this, they will need to follow the signals which the teacher uses to make clear the organisation of her talk. They will also need to learn some new vocabulary for the new concepts. Secondly they will need to follow the sequence of ideas in a reading text, using, again, connectors which show this sequence and the new vocabulary. Thirdly, they will need to talk to each other using the new vocabulary and getting the grammar reasonably right. Perhaps they will also need to use some key phrases for classifying

things. And lastly they will need to write using the new vocabulary, using some of the phrases for classifying and some connectors which show clarity in their writing.

2.3 Deciding where to provide support

Not all the students in this teacher's class need help with all these things. But some may. Possibly most students will need help with one or two main items of language.

The teacher knows his/her class and will be able to decide accordingly what help to give, to whom and at what point in the lesson. I should add that a teacher would not normally choose to teach a one lesson where so many things might prove difficult for the students. S/he would spread these difficulties across several lessons.

3. Forms of support

Before we look at how the teacher might support her students in the above activities, let us list the main forms of language support which are available to her.

3.1 Teacher-talk

Teachers can talk in ways which help students to understand. The main thing here is to ask questions – making them easier or more difficult according to the ability of the student –, to check regularly whether students understand, and to allow the students to use their L1 if necessary. They should also signal the organisation of their talk clearly (by using phrases such as for example, let me explain, in other words, etc), and they should summarise regularly

3.2 Visuals

Teachers should also make widespread use of visuals such as pictures, diagrams, graphs, charts etc. They also need to use visuals to show information structure in a text: for example a tree-diagram classifies; a flow diagram can show cause and effect. In addition, they will find that facial expressions, gestures and body language generally

are important.

3.3 Task design

Teachers will need to use a range of activities (for reading, writing, listening and speaking) which support the student at different levels of language. These include, for example, matching, sequencing, chart-filling, writing frames, lists of useful words and phrases etc. It is impossible here to give examples, but many teachers will recognise these activities. This is, however, another area in which some subject teachers will have to add to their normal teaching repertoire.

3.4 Forms of interaction

Teachers working in a L2 need to vary the form of classroom interaction. In other words, sometimes whole-class teacher talk is appropriate, whereas at other times students need to work in pairs and groups or on their own. Students may feel more comfortable, for example, speaking in English in small groups, but they may also need help to do it – which takes us back to task design (3.3) and leads us directly to the next section (3.5).

3.5 Use of the L1

Students often feel that it is easier in groupwork to talk to their peers in their L1. This may well be the natural thing to do, and teachers and students in CLIL classrooms need to agree on when it is appropriate to use the L1 and when it is not.

3.6 Learning strategies

As we have already said, students learning in a L2 are doing a lot of mental work. This means that they need to be able to perform a lot of learning skills, even more than if they were learning in their L1. CLIL teachers should therefore explicitly teach the most important learning strategies and expect students to use them, for example, note-taking, using dictionaries, doing research, planning for writing, learning words etc.

4. Forms of support

What does this mean for the teacher in section 2? What kinds of support could s/he offer? To help the students follow her presentation, she should pay attention to signalling and questioning (3.1) and she could use some visuals (3.2). To help them learn the new vocabulary, she could simply explain the terms carefully, put them on the board, use some diagrams and maybe (if they need it) translate some of them. To support the students in reading, she might use a chart which shows the structure of the main information: the students read and fill it in. To help them talk in groups, she could either let them use their L1 and require L2 only when they report; or s/he could supply on the board the key words and phrases (especially for classifying) which will help them use the L2 in their group talk. Finally, when they come to write, s/he may supply a writing frame (e.g. the main headings, sections, connectors, phrases for classification and sentence starters).

5. Summary

Some of the strategies in section 3 will be familiar to most subject teachers. In CLIL classrooms, the issue is simply that they have to use them more and more explicitly. Other strategies may be new to some teachers. The routine analysis of the cognitive and linguistic demands of lessons and the introduction of forms of language support are normally the things which subject teachers are least accustomed to doing. They are therefore the strategies which preparatory training for CLIL teachers needs to focus on most.

Biographical note

John Clegg is a freelance education consultant who works with teachers who teach the primary and secondary curriculum through a second language. He works in multicultural schools in the UK, in English-medium education in Africa and in bilingual schools in Europe. He runs training courses for subject teachers teaching through a second language at the University of Nottingham.