Planning CLIL Lessons

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To overcome the language barrier, CLIL teachers need to plan their lessons to include language support as well as content teaching. John Clegg explores the strategies that can be applied.

Teaching in L1

If you teach a subject in the first language (L1) of your learners – or in a language in which they are fluent – there are some things which you normally feel you can count on. I’ll mention two: basic language ability and academic language proficiency.

a) Basic language ability

Most teachers feel they can count on their learners being able to use the language of learning; in other words that they can talk without struggling with vocabulary and syntax; that they can listen with reasonable understanding to people talking at some length about a topic; and that can read and write at least at a minimally skilled level. In these respects teachers are normally right.

If you teach your subject in a second language (L2), you know that you normally can’t count on these things. Some learners will indeed be fairly fluent, in which case they will use the language reasonably well. But most learners in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes are not fluent. They are still learning the L2; and they are learning it ‘just in time’: i.e. they are learning in the same lesson the new subject concepts the teacher is introducing and the language they need for expressing these concepts. So CLIL teachers normally know that their students will probably not be able to talk in groups in L2 without help; that they will find it hard to write sentences without making grammatical errors and hunting for the right words to use; that they may have difficulty following all the details of what a subject teacher says; and that they may read subject textbooks in L2 more laboriously and less efficiently than in the L1.

b) Academic language proficiency

Another thing which most teachers also think that they can count on when they teach in L1 is that the learners can use their general language skills for the purposes of learning in school. In other words they have cognitive academic language proficiency or CALP. Here, teachers are on less safe ground.

While it’s true that most learners who are fluent in a language can use it easily for talking, reading and writing in informal social contexts, it’s probably not wise to assume that they can use it for learning. Most learners – using their L1 – cannot work through a problem in a small group and report their findings, without a lot of practice. They may not be able to follow fairly complex teacher talk on an unfamiliar topic without some difficulty. They might find it hard to read a fairly complex subject textbook; and they may well have difficulty planning, drafting and revising a piece of coherent writing about it. They may also have to learn from experience what it is like to express school thinking processes in the L1 – to define, classify, compare, contrast, hypothesise, show cause and effect etc; as well as to use the vocabulary of school learning – both the words which are specific to subjects and those which are cross-curricular. Finally they may never have been taught to use study skills in their L1: for example to take notes when reading or listening, to use the range of visuals which school subjects use (graphs charts, diagrams etc); and to use the reference sources which schools require learners to use – books, libraries, internet etc).

The truth is that schools don’t often teach these skills explicitly. Instead, teachers hope that their learners will pick them up. Some do indeed pick them up. These are normally the more middle-class children whose social and educational background has prepared them well for education from the first day of schooling.
Some children, however, continue, in the absence of formal instruction in these skills, to have difficulty using them. These skills are part of the hidden curriculum: teachers tend to assume that learners learn them, and often they get away with it: many learners – through repeated exposure – do simply acquire them.

**Teaching in L2**

Learners in CLIL programmes, however, may not use these academic language skills easily. Firstly, they may simply not have a good enough control over them: they belong to the group who have always found them hard to acquire in L1. Alternatively, they may have developed them to a degree in L1, but have difficulty applying them in L2. Why should they find this hard? Mainly because they are still developing basic L2 abilities. They have their hands full trying talk, listen, read and write with basic fluency. It is difficult enough to use the L2 for general purposes; to use it for learning subjects stretches their abilities to the limit. So in CLIL programmes it is difficult for subject teachers to ‘get away’ with avoiding teaching CALP explicitly. They can do this with L1-medium learners because they can rely on them having good social fluency and being able to develop this, without too much help, into academic proficiency. In CLIL programmes, their students are still developing social fluency, and will struggle to develop academic language ability alongside it. Learners in CLIL programmes are thus learning basic language skills, academic language skills and new subject concepts all at the same time.

**Support for learning**

This sounds difficult. And indeed it can be. But students in many CLIL classes do surprising well: they learn subjects and develop language abilities pretty successfully. How do students manage this?

- Often they are very well-motivated and resilient and this takes them a long way.
- They are often selected or self-selected, which means that many will come with at least half-developed academic language skills in L1, which they will use with some success in L2.
- Their teachers will, either explicitly or part-consciously sense that they have to teach in a different way and begin to accumulate new pedagogical strategies.
- Recognising what language problems learners will have by acknowledging the language demands of lessons.
- Helping learners to deal with language problems by providing support for language and learning.

If a subject teacher can get these two things right, they can teach securely in L2

**a) The language demands of lessons**

Lessons make language demands of learners, in any language: to learn successfully you have to use a set of academic language skills. To establish what they are, the following categories are useful.
Learners have to be able to:

- listen to and understand teachers talking about subjects
- talk about subjects themselves – to each other in groups and to the teacher in the plenary classroom
- read subject textbooks, and write about subjects.

When they are working in L2, they will have at least some problems in doing these things in most lessons. So when teachers plan lessons, they have to ask themselves when and where in the lesson the problems will occur, and what the nature of the problems will be. Doing this is a very practical task: the teacher has to ask simple questions and the table above will help:

At what points in the lesson will I ask the class to listen carefully to me and will they be able to do so?
If the answer is: it may be difficult (at least for some), they have to ask what it is which makes the listening difficult. It is likely to be an issue at either the word or text level (grammar is less of an obstacle to listening or reading). At the word level there may be a lot of new vocabulary which is specific to the topic. At the text level, learners may find it difficult to follow the logical organisation of teacher's presentation of a fairly complex set of ideas.

Will I expect the learners to talk, either in pairs or groups or to respond to me in the plenary classroom?
If I do, then I have to ask whether the students will be able to do that: will they, quite simply, be able to find the words and put them together in sentences easily (it is not likely, unless the teacher asks them to make extended oral presentations, that they need to think too much about the text level)? Or will many of them struggle – especially in groupwork – to talk in L2?

Will I require the class to read about the subject at any point? And if so, will they be able to do so adequately?
If the answer is that some may struggle with the text, the teacher needs to check whether there are word- and text-level difficulties in it which will cause this: is the vocabulary unfamiliar and is the text hard to follow?

Will the students have to write – either in class or for homework? If so, will they be able to produce the kind of text I expect?
If the answer is: not without help, then the teacher has to establish what kind of help they will need with words which might be unfamiliar, with forming sentences correctly and easily, and with organising them coherently in a text.

b) Language support

Put like this, it may seems as if the subject teacher has a lot to think about – even in one lesson – and that many of these problems are ones to which they may not have obvious answers. They may also quite properly presume that it is not their job to deal with all these problems: their language colleagues are better placed to do so – and we will return to this question below. The difficulty is that most of the biggest language problems have to be solved within this lesson, because if they are not, the learners will not learn the subject matter. So there is often no escape!

In fact what happens in CLIL lessons is that, as we mentioned above, teachers do teach and learners learn. In other words they solve these problems as they go along. Teachers gradually become skilled at anticipating language barriers and the process of planning lessons to overcome them becomes routine,
rather than laboured. And they gradually accumulate the new strategies which they need for providing support. What are the main support strategies they use?

**Support strategies for listening**
To help learners listen, subject teachers highlight or explicitly teach vocabulary. At the text level they help learners to follow them by using visuals and by adjusting their talking style: they enumerate points, give examples, explain, summarise, more then they would in L1.

**Support strategies for speaking**
To help students talk in the plenary classroom, they adjust their questions (asking, perhaps, some cognitively demanding but short answer questions); they prompt (for example they start learners’ responses for them); they provide vocabulary, they may allow some L1 responses. To help them talk in groups, they provide support at the word level by listing key words to use; to help with making sentences they can offer supportive task types such as talking frames, sentence starters or substitution tables; or they ask students to use their L1 when discussing but their L2 when reporting.

**Support strategies for reading**
To help students with reading they may check that they understand key vocabulary before they read; they may provide them with pre-reading questions to reduce the reading demands of the text; or they may offer help at the text level by giving reading support tasks, such as a chart to fill in, a diagram to label, etc.

**Support strategies for writing**
To help them with writing, they can offer support at all three levels by providing a vocabulary list, sentence starters, or a writing frame. They can also ensure that the learners talk through their writing at the word, sentence and text level, with each other, probably in L1, before they write.

These strategies amount to a different pedagogy from L1-medium teaching. When you work in L1, you don’t often have to anticipate the language demands of lessons in this way; neither do you have to provide much of this kind of language support. CLIL has its own specific pattern of teaching and CLIL teachers have to learn it. It means acquiring a new set of language-supportive task types, developing a different quality of teacher-talk, using a variety of forms of interaction and knowing whether or when to encourage the learners’ to use L1. These strategies will be familiar to subject teachers who are experienced in working in L2. They often acquire many of them simply by working them out for themselves. But many do not, and if they get no training they may carry on struggling with some of these problems for longer than is necessary.

**Lesson planning in CLIL**
Lesson planning in CLIL programmes requires teachers to anticipate language problems and help learners solve them as they proceed through the lesson. Once you accept that you have to do it, it becomes easier. If you get training to help you do it, it becomes easier still. Finally, language teachers know – to an extent – how to do these things. They haven’t normally been trained to provide help in L2-medium subject lessons, but they have a lot of the skills which will help them solve these problems. It is useful for subject teachers to collaborate with them, especially when they start out teaching in L2, and to get early help with planning lessons. The more they can get at this initial stage, the easier it is, with time, to incorporate simple lesson-planning routines into normal CLIL practice and fairly quickly to work independently with confidence.

By John Clegg