

Behind the news at Italian schools

‘Italy needs a good school ... because education is the only structural solution to unemployment,’ says La Buona Scuola, a law to reform the Italian school system approved in June 2015. The government’s recipe to tackle astronomical youth unemployment – 40 per cent according to Eurostat – includes, among other things, a focus on English and Clil.

Clil has appeared in Italian legislation since 2003, and as of 2012 has been introduced into senior secondary schools curricula. Academic high schools with a focus on foreign languages, *licei linguistici*, are now required to teach a non-linguistic subject in a foreign language in the last three years of study (15–18-year-old students). All other types of high schools, except vocational establishments, need to implement Clil in final-year curriculum.

Although not yet compulsory, Clil is on the cards for primary schools as well. Pilot projects such as the *Istruzione Bilingue in Italia/Bilingual Education in Italy (IBI/BEI)*, which allowed six primary schools to deliver 25 per cent of their curriculum in English (see interview below), helped pave the way for the methodology to be used with younger students.

Teacher training, both linguistic and methodological, remains a constant topic of discussion. The ministry of education first set the bar for teachers’ language level at C1, but this was lowered to B2 – and teachers with B1 English were also allowed to teach using Clil methodology while attending a training course. The need of teachers and schools for training has been acknowledged and, it seems, La Buona Scuola will allocate a substantial amount of resources to enhancing teachers’ skills. Clil training has also been supported by a series of incentives – for example, it will constitute a point of merit for those teachers applying to be transferred to another school.

The Gazette talked to a spokesperson from the British Council Italy, a foreign language inspector from the ministry of education and a school teacher to gain a comprehensive picture of how things are going for Clil in the *Bel Paese*. All interviews were conducted in English. It seems Clil is highly regarded by all stakeholders, even if some critics still argue that this innovation will prevent students from learning crucial content in their first language. Research has not yet been done to measure the outcomes of Italian students’ learning of subject content when taught using Clil methodology, but we eagerly await the results of future studies to, hopefully, prove those critics wrong.

Clil – the Italian model

Claudia Civinini talks to the British Council's Maria Norton about Clil and bilingual programmes in the Italian school system

British Council Italy is collaborating with the Ministry of Education to support the implementation of Clil and bilingual programmes in Italian schools. Maria Norton, the regional business development manager at British Council Italy, believes that communication is a key factor.

‘Clil benefits greatly from a communication strategy that engages audiences, particularly school heads, subject and language teachers, and parents of pupils,’ she says. ‘It is important to communicate widely to bust myths too.’

Norton explained that ‘the implementation of the Clil approach in Italy did initially stipulate a CEFR C1 level of language competence. In summer 2014 the government lowered this to B2, and this was welcomed. I believe that a teacher’s confidence and passion in conveying their subject can come across regardless of specific levels of language competence. A successful Clil lesson will have learners engaged in purposeful activity, with exchanges and interactions carried out in the vehicular language. In the case of Clil in Italy, 90 per cent of the time that language is English.’

What is the best age range to implement Clil? According to Norton, ‘Clil methodology can be applied to practically any school sector – what changes is the level of literacy assumed when starting out in primary school. The British Council provides consultancy for primary schools interested in developing a bilingual programme and there is a significant focus on developing literacy.’

And how does Clil impact on learning? ‘Implementing Clil methodology has been seen as a key lever in realising a number of the eight key competences for lifelong learning as recommended by the Council of Europe,’ Norton explained. ‘They can be considered interdependent with emphasis in each on critical thinking, creativity and problem solving. I therefore consider Clil as transformative, developing skills and competences in learners and teachers that outweigh those that would be gained from monolingual study. Clil has been found to be additive (one language supporting the other) rather than subtractive (one language working against the other).’

Regarding the IBI/BEI project (...), Norton told the *Gazette* that ‘through the delivery of 25 per cent of the school curriculum in English, the pupils were able to reach A2 level of competence by their final year of primary school. This achievement puts them three years ahead of mainstream education targets set for foreign language competence.’

The project evaluation report also observed that pupils who participated in the programme demonstrated greater problem-solving skills, cognitive skills and confidence in self-expression compared to peers who followed a monolingual track. Such a remarkable achievement was possible thanks to a training programme that involved 62 teachers and ongoing mentoring and support.

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Evaluating all the evidence

Claudia Civinini interviews Gisella Langé, a key figure in the implementation of high-school Clil programmes across Italy

Gisella Langé is a foreign languages inspector at the Italian Ministry of Education, coordinating and supporting Clil programmes in schools across the nation. She has also coordinated two evaluation reports on Clil in upper secondary schools – one published in 2014, the other being released as we go to press – that monitored the implementation of the methodology in Italian schools. She reveals some of the ministry's plans to get teachers ready for Clil, which include a focus on language training and internationalisation.

How is the implementation of Clil progressing?

According to the law, students in their last year of upper secondary school must have a subject taught in a foreign language. Clil is usually taught by the subject teacher. So far we haven't made Clil compulsory the way it should be, but we have been trying to make teachers aware that they should slowly and gradually ameliorate their language and methodological competences up to the point where they can deliver their lessons in the foreign language with confidence. We are slowly coming to this point. Many teachers have already accomplished their learning paths – to either B2 or C1 level. At this moment in every region of Italy around 2,000 teachers are attending seventy new methodological courses organised by universities and 6,000 teachers are involved in language courses organised by different institutions and organisations.

Is the implementation of Clil at primary school level still going ahead?

It is not easy to have Clil at low school levels. Teachers are not ready yet – primary teachers are generally at B1 level. Nevertheless the ministry is preparing a plan for languages within the framework of La Buona Scuola (a school reform law approved in June 2015). The general plan for teacher training will be funded with €120 million euros for a three-year period, and part of this money will be allocated to languages. Clil methodology will be extended to vocational, lower secondary and primary schools.

Teachers in primary schools will be invited to attend voluntary courses in order to reach B2 level. Where teachers are already B2, they will be offered the opportunity to have Clil methodology courses, and this will include the possibility to study abroad.

How do you measure outcomes for students, both in terms of language and curriculum?

We have been trying to organise some pilot English language tests in order to measure student outcomes, but we have not yet been able to organise a plan for the assessment of our students' subject performance. We wanted Clil to have a good start, therefore in our school leaving exam (*Esame di Stato*), we made Clil assessment mandatory only if the Clil subject teacher is a member of the board. We have been offered the possibility to test students' linguistic competence with a language test from EF, and a large sample of students in their third year of upper secondary school have taken this test. Results will be out next month.

The 2014 evaluation report on the introduction of Clil methodology in upper secondary schools that you co-ordinated showed that 70 per cent of Italian teachers had never organised

exchanges or training activities with foreign students. How can a more international mindset be promoted in schools?

We are trying our best to facilitate mobility, which will be an important part of teacher training. Under La Buona Scuola, training for teachers will be compulsory – a certain amount of hours yearly – either in the country or abroad. Erasmus+ will also offer more opportunities as well as the new Pon programme. Our teachers will be able to ameliorate their language competences either through local courses and/or going abroad. Strategic partnerships in the field of education will open new prospects for international links and exchanges. There must be a better use of new technologies and teachers need more support. Schools will also have funding to help teachers work together and create Clil digital materials.

The evaluation report of the IBI/BEI project (a bilingual education project for primary schools, see above) issued in April 2014 mentions that pupils' performance in the oral test was 'a little mechanical', as if they had simply memorised something they could not fully understand. There has been criticism of the methodology's potentially damaging impact on students' learning of the content. How would you respond?

That's not true. Evidence suggests that content can be conveyed properly through a foreign language in contexts where good teaching happens. Simplification doesn't mean banalisation.

Clil is proving to be a powerful changing agent – the best changing agent in our school system. There needs to be a cultural shift, so no more teacher-led lessons centred on content, but student-centred activities. Thanks to Clil, Italian teachers are trying more modern approaches and practices, focusing on scaffolding instruction, improving classroom management and increasing their own foreign language level!

The new monitoring report on upper secondary schools coming out at the end of April 2016 will give us fresh evidence of how Clil teachers are really changing their practice.

View from the classroom

Claudia Civinini speaks to teacher Diego Venezia about the reality of using Clil methodology within the Italian school system

Professor Diego Venezia has been teaching history in English using Clil methodology for four years at Liceo Linguistico Grazia Deledda, a secondary school in Genoa, Italy, owned by the Genoa Council and run by a not-for-profit foundation. Founded in 1874, Liceo Linguistico Deledda was the first ‘languages high school’ in Italy and has more than twenty years’ experience with Clil – I myself have fond memories of studying history in French and failing maths in more than one language when I was a student there.

In 1999 the former head teacher of Liceo Deledda established the Deledda International School, one of the few public institutions in Italy offering International Baccalaureate and Middle Years Programme, and boasting a 94 per cent pass rate in the IB. However, even in this international setting, Clil still sparks questions – and the issues brought up by Venezia have appeared in the Italian press over the last few years: low levels of English, reasonable doubts about the effectiveness of the methodology and, above all, lack of appropriate teacher training and resources.

‘Clil is the typical case of a good idea which is being badly managed by the Italian government,’ Venezia commented. ‘A remarkable innovation has been introduced in the school system but with a lack of resources for the schools and training for the teachers.’

Venezia also thinks that scientific subjects could be better suited to Clil methodology than humanities. ‘Humanities imply a very active use of language during lessons and are characterised by a highly specific and difficult vocabulary. In Italy some universities already have scientific degrees in English, like Politecnico in Milan, so it would be wiser to teach such subjects [in English] in high school as well.’

Providing the appropriate linguistic scaffold to facilitate learning, Venezia believes that ‘in the near future Clil could be a significant opportunity for Italian children’. However, the old problem still remains: ‘Even if you have studied – and very well – foreign languages, you know that in Italy we need to work hard to keep up with other European countries in learning and speaking English and other foreign languages. Our students generally don’t have a good level of English, and we need to improve it.’

What kind of resources does a school need to implement a successful Clil programme? Venezia explained: ‘I think that a school needs, above all, good teachers! Referring to Clil it’s necessary to have teachers with a very good knowledge of both the foreign language involved and the subject taught, and at the moment teachers possessing these skills are very difficult to find.’

‘Liceo Deledda offered us a free course in Clil teaching and it was a great opportunity, but we need more language courses. Considering the fact that Clil is based on a different idea of teaching – cooperative learning – a school needs multimedia tools such as IT rooms and free access to the internet. Liceo Deledda offers us all these instruments but unfortunately not all schools in Italy can have access to these resources.’

How are Italian schools reacting to Clil? ‘I think that very few schools are really teaching Clil. It’s still at an experimental stage because of the lack of teachers able to teach it. I think we have to wait for the next generation of teachers, who will be more skilled in foreign

languages. In the schools where Clil has really started, like Deledda, it’s considered as a very important part of the curriculum and is highly regarded by all colleagues and students.’

Venezia added, ‘Clil is very helpful from a linguistic point of view. The students have the opportunity to use the foreign language in a lot of different contexts and subjects, they learn a lot of specific lexis and they practise the language in different forms (e.g. presentation, research).

‘It allows students to learn context-based English with a more practical and interactive approach, and due to the teacher not being a language teacher students are less self-conscious while speaking English and are not afraid of being judged.

‘Studying a Clil subject implies considering English not as a school subject but as an instrument to convey a message. The main disadvantage, in my opinion, is that the Clil subjects are simplified in order to make them understandable for students. If you teach history in English or science in German you can’t go deep inside the themes of the subject as you could if you were teaching them in your mother tongue.’