



Terrific tools for language teaching

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I am proud to call myself a Teacher. I absolutely love my job! How many people do you know can say that about what they do? But they don't understand us - we teachers stick together. As teachers, we spend more waking hours of time with our colleagues than with our own families; more time with other people's children than with our own. We bring students' books home with us nearly every day of the week. We never "switch-off" and we're forever spending our own hard-earned money to buy resources for our classrooms, for "our kids." During "Report Season" our friends and family become strangers and for weeks on end, our entire living-room is filled with strategically-placed piles of marking. We laugh, we cry, we carry the burdens of our students on our shoulders... But we don't mind because being a teacher is an honour. We know that we are responsible for not only educating but for *inspiring* the minds of the world's future leaders. We work hard because we love what we do! Thankfully, most teachers share my sentiments.

But it's not always rainbows and sparkles. Teaching presents a myriad of challenges every single day. Ensuring that we maintain an exciting and engaging curriculum for our students is one such challenge, particularly with senior-school students. When teaching in another language however, this can be an even greater challenge. How do you successfully obtain the concentration, let alone the *interest*, of a classroom full of students if they cannot speak or understand the language!? Well, this isn't as difficult as one might imagine - you just need the right tools.

There is no 'i' in TEAM!

The most valuable resource in any classroom, is the teacher. It doesn't matter if the room is filled with the latest and greatest technology and hundreds of beautiful displays. Equally, it is irrelevant if the learning space is nothing more than four, plain walls and old out-dated resources. The most influential factor in student learning is the teacher. We have a huge responsibility and at times, this can feel daunting... But what an honour it is to be held in such high esteem! Our students look up to us and we must therefore fulfil this role-model status. The minute that you stop enjoying being a teacher, is the exact moment when you need to leave the profession and do



something else. Our work is far too important to simply continue for the sake of it. There is a fabulous quote that I will share;

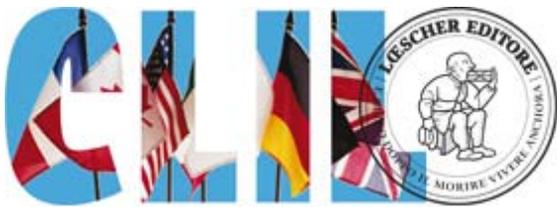
*The mediocre teacher tells.
The good teacher explains.
The superior teacher demonstrates.
The great teacher inspires!!*

William Arthur Ward!

We should ALWAYS strive to be great teachers! It is up to us to bring the colour to the classroom, to help our students to see the MAGIC that comes with learning an additional language! If we can do this as individual teachers, IMAGINE what can be achieved if we work together in a team of teachers!! Working together allows us to share our ideas and work which of course will ultimately be for the benefit of our students. This can at first be a little unnerving - it can be scary sharing your ideas with your colleagues. «*What if they think my lessons are silly? What if I make a mistake? What if it doesn't work? What if, whatif, what if... ?????*»

Life is full of “what-ifs” and teaching is no exception. We need to put aside our own fears and get on with the job. More communication between teachers must occur. We teach a room full of students with differing learning-styles so we must therefore strive to cater for all of these in our lessons. However, our teaching is at risk of becoming too limited because of our own learning-styles... This can therefore be of detriment to our students. One practical method in which to overcome this, is to hold regular planning meetings with other teachers. There needs to be more opportunities for the language teachers to discuss and plan the school curriculum with other staff members. Too often these teachers are left to organize their work programs by themselves, which can lead to them feeling as though they are teaching in isolation... They are not part of a team. Moreso, limited interaction with classroom teachers can potentially lead to repetitious lessons and highly disengaged students... This is *not* good for the reputation of Language Education.

So firstly, a restructure of school timetables needs to occur to allow time for language teachers to plan with classroom teachers - even if it's just once a term to begin with. In doing so, at least the outcome will result in a planner that includes input from all teachers. Secondly, greater communication between teachers is an absolute necessity - on a regular basis. We all know how quickly lessons change - it



is important that all members of our teaching team are kept updated to accommodate for these changes.

For instance; if a lesson had previously been planned *without* any language links yet upon teaching the content to your students it becomes apparent that they are making the links naturally - then allow this to occur! Better still, nurture this change of tangent and integrate more language education into the subsequent lessons. It is always far better to go with the interest of the students than against it! Finally, consider arranging some Team-Teaching lessons whereby both the classroom teacher and the language teacher are present. Plan the lesson(s) together and delivery the content to your students collaboratively. I can guarantee that you will all gain so much from this experience! This brings me to Tool Number Two; CLIL.

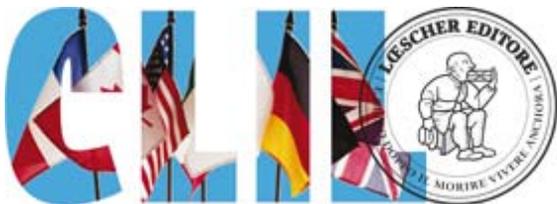
Teaching Through CLIL Units!

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is the future of language education - all over the world. I would not make such a bold and definitive statement unless I fully believed it. I have seen the impact CLIL has had on my own students and I therefore completely endorse this form of language education.

My “difficult, disruptive and disengaged boys” became focussed and motivated in their learning, displaying behaviour and a level of eagerness that I had not seen in them before. It was MAGIC! So what is CLIL and why is it so successful?

As explained by Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2009:1), «*CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language*». CLIL is teaching a skill with another language. This may sound incredibly daunting for the nervous and inexperienced teacher. It may be equally fearsome for those who have been in the teaching profession for many years. In most cases, these two categories of teachers share the same underlying fear; they lack confidence in their ability to use the additional language in their teaching. They are afraid of not knowing the language well enough to use it as the vehicle of instruction for teaching the content and skill(s).

However their angst is unnecessary because in its' very nature, CLIL brings people together. The language teachers and subject and/or classroom teachers must work together to develop and teach the unit. This ultimately becomes a very well supported program and the teaching and learning relationships between the language teacher and content/classroom teacher; between the students and between classroom teachers are all enhanced. CLIL is a “learning leveler” and it



allows the concept of what I refer to as “The Sideways Ladder” to develop in classrooms.

The Sideways Ladder is a term that I created to explain the beautiful role-reversal between students and teachers. Too often I feel that teachers place themselves too high on a metaphorical ladder. Although it is obvious that they are the figure of authority in a classroom, there needs to be a shift away from a directorship-style of teaching and a move towards the teacher as being a facilitator of learning - and a learner themselves. In this role, teachers gently guide their students to naturally discover the learning for themselves. CLIL lessons more easily accommodate for a Sideways Ladder model of teaching and learning. In these positive shared learning environments, it becomes possible for the students to teach new skills, facts or vocabulary to their teachers and for everyone to learn together on a more equal platform. As educators, we must remember that learning also occurs outside of our classrooms and that our students acquire knowledge from a myriad of external resources. It is therefore very realistic to accept situations where the students are teaching their teachers. Sometimes it can be a little concerning for the teacher to accept this change, but once they become open to the idea, the learning opportunities are endless!

Along with The Sideways Ladder scenario, CLIL teaching allows for beautiful collaborative learning to occur between the students - Group Work. Students teaching each other in group situations is highly undervalued - so much can be gained from group work! Although we strive to explain our lessons in perfect detail, sometimes this isn't enough for some students and they still struggle to make sense of the information - particularly in the additional language. But by encouraging students to work together cooperatively, the task becomes less daunting and far more achievable. The previously reluctant and shy students now have a “safe” environment in which they become more active in their language-learning. Students become so focussed on learning the skill that they don't realise how much of the language is being learnt and applied! This is the beauty of CLIL. The pressure that students so often associate with language classes is alleviated and instead a more natural, relaxed learning of the language takes place.

There are so many other benefits to CLIL, but rather than me listing them all here, why don't you try incorporating this pedagogy into your classroom and see what these benefits are for yourself. Your students will thank you for it - trust me!



Embrace the i-era!

Tool Number Three for language teaching is technology. It coincides beautifully with CLIL and it is becoming more and more accessible all over the world. Let's face it; we are living in the "i" revolution and technology is at the forefront of our daily lives. We can transfer money whilst waiting in line at the supermarket; download a train timetable; record the duration and distance of our exercise; book tickets and reserve our seats for the latest movie; and manage our email accounts - all from the palm of our hands! Rarely do we use our mobiles for actually making a phone-call! Our students are no different, perhaps even more device-dependant, especially as we move higher through the school levels. What does this mean for the teaching and learning of additional languages?

I recently saw an ingenious way of recording student attendance. The teacher (perhaps tired of technology-related interruptions to his lessons), had made a storage unit for his students' phones. It was a clear display-bag with 25 separate compartments, one for each of his students. Upon their arrival at school, the students are required to store their phones in their pouch. As far as the teacher was concerned, it solved two "problems" 1) Independent recording of student attendance (allowing more time for the teacher to complete other start-of-the-day administrative tasks) and 2) No more annoying beeping messages or chiming Facebook notifications which allowed for higher levels of concentration from his students. Whilst I praised his creativity and success with the "Attendance Phone Pouch", I couldn't help but think that he was missing a golden opportunity... He wasn't using one of the best tools possible for his language teaching!

With the world so easily at our fingertips, wouldn't we be better off embracing the presence of these devices in our classrooms and allowing our students to learn with these incredible tools? If technology is what motivates our students, I believe that we as teachers should use this to our advantage. There are thousands of resources available online; interactive websites, games, language communities... You can download a huge variety of apps relating to language learning, suitable for a range of learners of varying ages and abilities. These can then become easily incorporated into engaging whole-class or small-group lessons - the options are only limited to your imagination!



So to reflect. Teachers need to communicate and work together to plan their CLIL programs and utilise a range of technology that will engage and motivate student learning. This is by no means a complete list of tools for enhancing language teaching and learning. Rather, these are the basics that I recommend be applied first. Making big changes to your teaching practices can feel daunting and overwhelming but just remember this one-liner from Yours Truly; *Starting somewhere and starting small, is better than not starting at all.* You are an exceptional teacher and you will be just fine.

REFERENCES

CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning

Do Coyle, Philip Hood and David Marsh (2010; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK).

* www.thelanguagetoolbox.com.au