CLIL in the Italian University
A Long but Promising Way to Go

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Abstract   It has often been claimed that methodologies integrating the study of a foreign language with that of another non-linguistic subject (i.e. CLIL or CBI) lead to considerable advantages in both language and content learning. In order to investigate this claim in relation to post-secondary education, this paper reports an experiment in which the progress made by a group of university students who attended a CLIL-type English course was compared to that of a control group attending a traditional EFL course. The results obtained mostly confirmed the initial hypothesis that the CLIL group would outperform the control group, at least as far as more communicative skills were concerned.

1 Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (henceforth CLIL), in its various forms, has been claimed to lead to higher rates of success in communication – and sometimes even in grammatical accuracy – for foreign language learners (cfr. Wesche 2002; Mehisto, Frigols, Marsh 2008; Ruiz de Zarobe, Jimenez Catalan 2009; Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010). It thus seems to be desirable to apply this teaching approach at all levels, including post-secondary education situations, rather than using the foreign language as a simple means of instruction or, to the contrary, to focus on it as the only subject of study. In many countries around the world content-based instruction has already been adopted for decades (cfr. Stryker, Leaver 1997; Kasper, Bobbit 2000; Wächter, Maiworm 2008; Airey 2009), while in other countries CLIL methodologies – and foreign language learning in general – do not seem to be taking off on a proper scale. Italy clearly belongs to the latter group. In spite of EU-inspired governmental guidelines, lack of resources, continuity and motivation prevents FLT practice from getting any near the standards set at the institutional level, weighing down on the application of more effective methodologies and on the actual outcomes of the learning process.

This paper reports an isolated experiment, in which the teaching of Eng-

lish cultural studies was integrated with that of the language itself. Data were collected for two consecutive academic years (2009-10 and 2010-11) from two experimental groups of 31 and 28 learners respectively, all of whom had just attended integrated English language and culture classes as part of a degree course in Primary Education at Genoa University (Italy). Two other groups of Primary Education students (46 in all) had attended an analogous course according to a traditional approach, by which language and culture were taught separately: they were thus used as controls. Both affective and performance evidence was gathered, but, given time and space restrictions, I will only be dealing with the latter. Performance evidence was classified into eight categories, each referring to a different linguistic module or skill: fluency, communication, discourse structure, grammatical structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening and reading. The tools used to collect such data were systematic observation and mid-term and end-of-course testing.

   The results showed that the CLIL groups did generally better in fluency, communication and listening comprehension. On the other hand, the control group obtained higher scores in pronunciation and discourse, revealing a lack of focus in CLIL methodology which could nevertheless be easily compensated for.

2 CLIL Methodology

Though the term CLIL was introduced in 1994 by Marsh and Maljers (cfr. Marsh, Maljers, Hartiala 2001), the idea of integrating content and language teaching goes farther back in time. Some even date it back to partial immersion programmes in ancient Mesopotamia, almost 5,000 years ago (cfr. Mehisto, Frigols, Marsh 2008). It is not until the second half of the 20th century, however, that a full theorization of the learning implications of such practices was developed. In the 1970's and 80's the term Content-Based Instruction (CBI) was adopted, especially in the USA, to designate a methodology that involved «the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and foreign language skills» (Brinton, Snow, Wesche 1989, p. 2). Practicing and analyzing CBI at University or College was rather popular in the 1990's (cfr. Stryker, Leaver 1997; Kasper, Bobbit 2000), while the acronym has often been used interchangeably with CLIL, or CLIL seen as a specific instance of CBI (cfr. Fernández 2009).

   I will be using the term CLIL rather than CBI, both because of its further emphasis on the interplay between subject matter and language, learning skills, cultural issues, affectivity and meaningful interaction,[1] and for the

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1 Often subsumed in Coyle's 4 C's: Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture (cfr. Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010).

simple reason that this has been the more popular term in European settings for the last twenty years. Just like CBI, CLIL is actually an umbrella term that has been construed in different ways and which comprises a whole range of different practices, from total to partial immersion, from language showers to international projects. It is generally recommended that both language and content be the target of the learning process, but, according to the specific situation (including linguistic and cultural environment, the learners' age and level, their specific needs, availability of time and resources) the two can carry different weight and stand in different relations to each other.

The various types of relations between content and language can actually be placed on a continuum: at one end, there is the use of a working language as a mere medium of instruction, where the main objective is to teach the content rather than the language (content driven instruction); at the other end, we find a rather different picture, in which the teaching of content is a tool aimed at facilitating language learning (language driven instruction) (cfr. Coonan 2002; Balboni 2002; Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010). What is generally understood as CLIL tends to stand more towards the content-driven end of the continuum, giving content outcomes at least as much weight as language outcomes (cfr. Dalton-Puffer 2007), though most research to date has focussed on language rather than on content learning in CLIL environments.

The adoption of CLIL methodology, involving a dual focus on language and content learning, has some immediately evident advantages. First of all, the combination of different learning objectives is likely to lead to better results than tackling the two aspects separately. It has been shown that the human brain assimilates more knowledge when it is doing more than one thing at a time: the effort of communicating in a foreign language can enhance learning of the contents, while concentrating on contents can trigger unconscious language learning (cfr. Mehisto, Frigols, Marsh 2008; Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010). The manipulation of new but partly expectable subject matter also implies the occurrence of meaningful input (cfr. Krashen 1985, 1994) and comprehensible output (cfr. Swain 1993). Purposeful interaction, where language is used to convey real meanings and to achieve real objectives, creates communicative needs and boosts the learners' motivation.[2]

Another characteristic of CLIL is in fact a constant focus on communicative competence (cfr. Coyle, Hood, Marsh 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe, Jimenez

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2 It has been suggested (cfr. Dalton-Puffer 2007, 2008) that a fundamental difference between CLIL and traditional EFL teaching may be found in classroom discourse: while traditional students are often asked to produce concise responses in a given linguistic form, CLIL students, by focussing on non-linguistic explanations, are freer to choose their own words and encouraged to expand more on their replies.

Catalan 2009). Fluency is often privileged over accuracy and the main aim of interaction in and outside the classroom is always to communicate meanings successfully rather than producing perfectly native-like utterances. Clearly, in order to make oneself understood, especially in international environments, the learner must achieve a certain level of accuracy, too. As we will see, the problem with monolingual classes is that the students, sharing a first language, are rarely stimulated to go beyond a certain basic level of correctness. In CLIL classrooms in particular, very little explicit reference to language structure is made, which may result in a lower degree of noticing and thus of accuracy (cfr. Schmidt 1990).

CLIL, like many present-day methodologies, also insists on the acquisition of learning skills and strategies, more than on the assimilation of the specific notions provided by a course. Since it is impossible to teach all relevant linguistic and non-linguistic features in a few weeks, or even a few years, it becomes more important to give students the tools to go on acquiring knowledge in the future, in a life-long-learning perspective.

Another trait that CLIL shares with other communicative-humanistic methodologies is the attention accorded to affectivity, i.e. to the learner's psychological and emotional well-being. This aspect concerns establishing a good learning environment, improving the student's relation with the teacher and classmates and her/his attitude to the language and culture and any other non-linguistic content being studied, making the learners feel at ease by giving them encouragement and positive feedback and taking their minds off the worries of speaking in a foreign language by focussing on content. Positive attitudes, lower levels of anxiety and increased self-confidence can be a much stronger source of motivation than the extrinsic need to learn contents and language (cfr. Bosisio 2011).

Due to the globalization of academic research and of the labour market, the practice of adopting English as the vehicular language of most or all university courses is becoming more and more widespread. Immersion or bilingual approaches have proved to be particularly useful when applied to higher education environments, where a certain degree of grammatical knowledge has been achieved, and the ability to communicate in an international context is felt as most urgent (cfr. Wächter, Maiworm 2008; Airey 2009; Fernández 2009; Bosisio 2011; Carloni 2013; Mourssi, Al Kharosi 2014).

3 The Courses

I therefore decided to embark on an experimental course, in which the study of English-speaking countries and their cultures would be integrated with the study of the language itself.

The students in this course, called English Language and Culture 2, had already taken another English course at University, since their address

(Primary Education) required three foreign language examinations: Foreign Language and Culture, Foreign Language and Culture 2 and Foreign Language Teaching.

As material for my experiment, I decided to only use almost non-simplified authentic texts, hypertexts and videos, mostly downloaded from the internet. The topics ranged from the history and present situation of the English language, to the geography, history and politics of the English speaking countries (e.g. Climate in Canada and Jamaica, tourism in Australia and New Zealand, the US political system, Apartheid in South Africa), to cultural truths and stereotypes (e.g. Education in Britain and the USA, social etiquette in Australia), to legends, fairytales and traditional celebrations (e.g. The Three Little Pigs, Humpty Dumpty, St. Patrick's day), to art, literature, sports and current affairs. Content objectives were stressed rather than language objectives, which remained widely implicit (apart from the brief end-of-lesson excursions I mention below). The topics, materials and activities were generally engaging and conversational, though posing a rather high cognitive and conceptual challenge.

At the beginning of each lesson (30 2-hour lessons in all), the students were invited to stand or sit in a 'starting' or 'warm-up circle', in which they were asked to express their feelings about the course, to tell each other about particular events or thoughts or to perform TPR activities or communicative games. After this, they were introduced to the lesson topic, usually through some elicitation techniques such as brainstorming or picture description, in order to explore their previous knowledge. They were then presented with the texts, which they were asked to process by means of various comprehension and re-elaboration tasks, such as content prediction, paragraph reordering, skimming for gist, scanning for particular information, answering open-ended or multiple choice questions, finding key-words, summarizing. These led to a follow-up phase based on games, role-play and/or discussion. Students mostly worked in pairs or groups, so that teacher talking time was considerably reduced, in spite of the constant scaffolding presence of the teacher, acting as a facilitator. She often adopted affective techniques, such as positive feedback and the use of irony, to keep the students confident and engaged.

Often, at the end of the lesson, some grammatical issue was briefly discussed, which had emerged as the lesson unrolled. It was actually the students who asked for these grammar sessions: clearly, due to their age and previously developed learning habits, they felt more secure if they could hold onto some prescriptive rules.

The lesson plan was always kept open to changes and adaptations, which often took place as the activities were implemented. Greetings, classroom language and other authentically used chunks were practiced at every lesson.

For the first few lessons, the students could use their L1 in class, provided this was done with moderation; they were however told that they would

not be allowed to use Italian after lesson 10, and that they should try hard to prepare themselves for the change, gradually reducing the frequency and length of L1 exchanges. The teacher, on the other hand, always spoke in English, apart from the introductory speech she gave at the very beginning of the course. Personal questions at the very start and at the very end of the lesson, however, were usually dealt with in Italian, on special request of the students themselves.

In her initial speech, the teacher explained in detail the course structure and objectives, discussed the timetable and lesson development, anticipated what the final exam format would be like and encouraged the students to take a positive attitude towards the course. Every two or three weeks, objectives and learning outcomes were analyzed by means of questionnaires and whole-class interviews.

4 The Study

The course became part of a study aimed at testing if the application of CLIL methodology could actually enhance the students' linguistic ability, both directly and indirectly, by affecting their emotional and motivational state. In fact, the study was looking for two types of evidence: *affective evidence* and *performance evidence*.[3] However, due to lack of space and time, this paper will only be analysing performance evidence, i.e. data concerning the actual linguistic output and progress of the informants (for data on affective evidence, see Bosisio 2011).

4.1 Methodology

The informants in the study were a group of 59 students who regularly attended,[4] subdivided into four shifts (two in 2009-10, two in 2010-11), my 10-week English Language and Culture 2 course, comprising 60 hours of teaching (30 two-hour lessons). The results obtained with this group of students were compared to those of a control group of 46 students, who attended a 'traditional' course divided into 2 modules: 40 hours of language, based on a functional-notional syllabus with explicit grammar teaching and training, and 20 hours of cultural studies, which were taught and tested in Italian.

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3 Evidence concerning the acquisition of content features, instead, lay outside the scope of this study.

4 The total number of students who enrolled in the course was actually 132, but working students are generally unable to attend part or all of the classes, so that their performance was not taken into consideration.

Performance data were classified into eight categories, each referring to a different linguistic module or skill. The first category was that of *fluency*, i.e. the capacity to deliver content in a smooth and voluble way, and concerned features such as length of utterance, hesitations or speech rate. The second category concerned *communication*, i.e. the degree of ability to interact with others in the foreign language and to convey and understand meanings (e.g. making oneself understood, explaining, describing, answering questions, collaborating, getting people to do things, taking turns in conversation, using the language appropriately). The third category was *discourse structure*; it concerned the way in which the informants constructed their texts, giving them grammatical, lexical and conceptual cohesion in relation to both their internal structure and to the external context (internal and external cohesion). This can be done through various devices, such as the time/tense frame, repetition of words and concepts, the use of anaphors and connectors, parallelism, topicalization. The next two categories that were taken into consideration were *grammatical structure*, comprising both syntactic and morphological ability, and *vocabulary*. The latter category concerned both active and passive knowledge of words, idioms and collocations, their appropriateness with respect to the context and their consistency of use. The sixth category was that of *pronunciation*, both in the speaking and the reading styles; it included segmental, suprasegmental and connected speech features. The last two categories were defined on the basis of two of the four traditional skills: *listening* and *reading*.[5]

Performance data were collected by means of two instruments. The first one was systematic observation of groups and individuals, conducted both by following a pre-compiled observation sheet and by freer annotation. In order to be able to both manage the lessons and collect the data from a more neutral perspective, I recorded most activities and then analyzed the videos outside the classroom. Structured and unstructured notes, however, were taken both during the lessons and when revising the videos.

Observation was conducted on a continuous basis, so that progress could be tracked. For each of the above-mentioned eight categories, the structured notes were made on a grid which exhibited cells for the different features taken into consideration. For fluency, the features were mean length of utterance, speech rate, hesitations, ease of utterance; for communication, getting a message across, understanding teacher/classmates, group/pair work participation, getting others to do things, asking questions, replying, turn-taking. The discourse features were sequencing/arranging elements, connecting elements, time/tense frame, topicalization, anaphoric reference, grammatical cohesion, lexical cohesion, conceptual

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5 The other two skills were not considered because, while *speaking* was tested more in detail in its component parts, *writing*, though practiced in the course as integrated with the other skills, was not a specific target of the teaching/learning process.

cohesion, contextual cohesion. The grammatical features were word or-
der, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses and aspects, noun number, pro-
nouns, prepositional phrases, connectors, determiners, explicit subjects.
For vocabulary, the selected features were passive knowledge of lexical
items, active knowledge of lexical items, semantic fields, key-words recog-
nition, meaning deduction from context/co-text, appropriateness, variety,
long-term storage. The pronunciation category included the production
of single problematic sounds (e.g. vowels, interdental fricatives, [h]), the
production of consonant clusters, syllable structure, word stress, sentence
stress, intonation, connected speech phenomena. Both the listening and
reading categories included the features understanding the general situa-
tion, listening/reading for gist, identifying key-words/concepts, looking for
specific information, detail comprehension, use of contextual/co-textual
cues; reading also had the feature timing, while a special place was given
to musical cues in listening. Space for 'other observations' was also left in
the grid. At the end of the course, after revising the notes and comparing
the different students' performances, the single observations were rated
on a 4-point scale (1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = pass, 3 = good, 4 = excellent).

The second tool was the administration of two oral tests, one in week 6
and one at the end of the course. Each test was made up of a speaking, a lis-
tening and a reading task. The speaking task involved a long and articulated
conversation about everyday matters and the contents dealt with during the
course. To test their listening abilities more in depth, the informants were
asked to watch a video and perform three short tasks: first listening for gist
(i.e. to understand the situation), then searching for specific information
and finally answering more detailed comprehension questions. The same
three types of tasks were applied to a written text to gather evidence on the
informants' reading abilities; reading aloud was also required, in order to
better test pronunciation skills. The students' performance was evaluated
by five native English teachers on each of the eight categories described
above, once again using the above-mentioned 4-point scale. Clearly, their
judgment was relative to the required level of the course (B1-B2 of the Com-
mon European Framework of Reference for Languages).

When all data were collected, percentages, averages and standard devia-
tions were calculated for each group of students in each task with respect
to all variables.

4.2   Predictions

Based on common sense and previous studies, the CLIL students were
expected to do better in those categories that involved conveying and
understanding meanings, establishing and maintaining contact and ex-
changing information, such as fluency, communication and perhaps dis-

course structure (cfr. Mewald 2007; Rieder, Hüttner 2007). The language having been presented in a meaningful context, vocabulary acquisition should also be facilitated (cfr. Agustín-Llach, Canga Alonso 2014), and so should listening and reading skills (cfr. Dalton-Puffer 2007; 2008; Liubiniene 2009). Grammatical and phonological proficiency are not among the main objectives in a CLIL class, but increased L2 exposure may well compensate for the lack of explicit targeting (cfr. Adrián, Mangado 2009; Dalton-Puffer 2008).

5 Results

When dealing with performance evidence, differences between the CLIL and the control group were much less striking than for affective data, probably due to the complexity of the situation, the diversity of the students' backgrounds and the brevity of the course. Some rather clear trends could nevertheless be detected.

First of all, in order to be able to consider the results reliable, consistency in evaluation was checked by means of correlation analysis. Generally, there was consistency both among the five native speakers' judgments and between those and my observations (Pearson indexes of a high magnitude, 0.80-0.90). I will first report the more quantifiable outcomes of the mid-term and end-of-term tests, followed by those of the structured and unstructured observation of the students' performance and progress.

5.1   The Tests

On the whole, partly corresponding to our expectations, the CLIL group did better in fluency, communication and listening, while the control group did better in pronunciation and discourse; no significant differences were found in grammar, vocabulary and reading. Improvements generally took place from test 1 to test 2 for both the target and the control group, but significant differences were found according to the features taken into consideration.

In all cases, there was a restricted number of informants who obtained excellent results (not always the same for the different features), while the majority of students converged on the central band (good/pass), displaying a certain tendency to symmetry in the relative frequencies, which is generally typical of performance data.

We will now take a closer look at the results of the tests, analyzing them category by category and drawing comparisons between the achievements of the control group and those of the target group and between those obtained by the same group of informants at different times. The results will also be summarized in histograms that express in percentage the

evaluation obtained (excellent, good, pass, unsatisfactory) by each of the two groups in each of the tests (Target Group, Mid Term test = TG (MID), Control Group, Mid Term test = CG (MID), Target Group, Final test = TG (FIN.), Control Group, Final test = CG (FIN.)).

5.1.1   Fluency

As was said in 4.1, fluency is the ability to produce smooth and voluble speech, at a steadily fast pace, without unnatural hesitations, for as long a time as is desired. It is undoubtedly one of the last and hardest skills to achieve for foreign learners, who tend to speak in short, broken sentences, at an unnaturally slow speech rate. It is one of the main aims of CLIL and other communicative methodologies to help students improve their fluency, in order to facilitate communication.

As can be seen from Fig. 1, very few informants achieved what was considered an excellent degree of fluency for their level. In spite of this, improvements from the first test results to the second can be tracked for both the target and the control group, though they were much more evident for the former. This seems to confirm (see Fig. 2) that a more extensive use of communicative tasks, a stronger urge to convey meanings and contents, an increment in student speaking time and a less conscious focus on language structure may enhance the ability to produce longer and more fluent utterances.
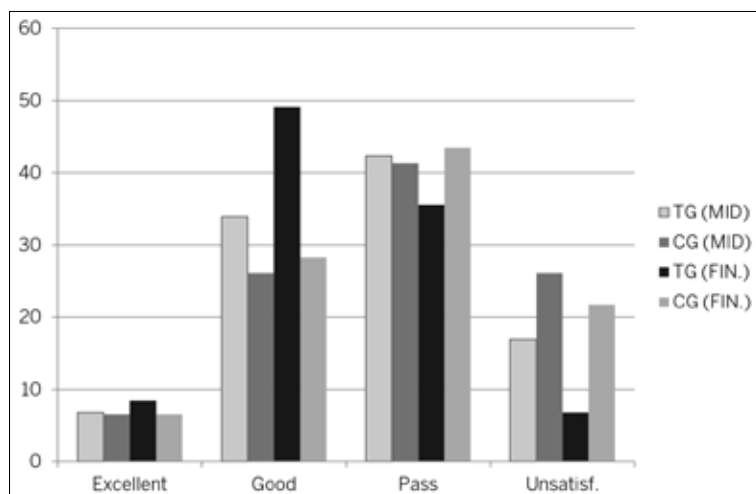

Figure 1. Fluency

5.1.2   Communication

Communication is the ability to conduct a successful exchange, interacting with other speakers in a meaningful way, so as to convey contents efficiently and appropriately; just like fluency, this skill was expected to be more common among CLIL learners than among students in a more traditional course.

In fact, the results obtained in the tests for communication skills appear to confirm even more strongly our expectations: the target group, apart from undergoing a sharp improvement (a growth in 'good' and even 'excellent' and a downturn in 'pass' and especially in 'unsatisfactory'), displayed a much higher percentage of good marks and lower percentage of bad marks than the control group, which even showed a slight – perhaps insignificant – increase in the unsatisfactory percentage between the first and the second test.

A greater emphasis on contents rather than (at least consciously) on language probably stimulated the learners to sharpen their communicative abilities, in order to get messages across and to complete particular tasks. Discussion, teamwork and problem solving were more common in the CLIL course than in the traditional one.
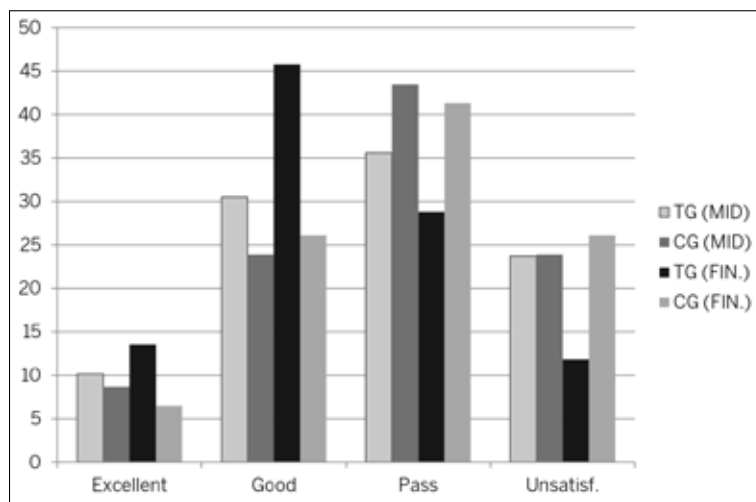

Figure 2. Communication

5.1.3   Discourse Structure

Contrary to fluency and communication, the target group did clearly worse than the control group in the skill we called 'discourse structure' (see Fig. 3). That is, their capacity to construct cohesive texts by using devices such as connectors, parallelisms, topicalization, anaphors and time/tense relations seemed to be less developed. In spite of the usual general improvement between the mid-term and end-of-term test, the CLIL students obtained a considerably high number of 'unsatisfactory', and their percentages of good marks were definitely inferior to those of the controls. A possible explanation is that more noticing of the relevant items was triggered in the traditional course; such features are more to do with structure – and hence accuracy – than with communicative skills. I suspect, however, that it may have been a matter of individual inclinations and learning styles, so that further, more specific investigation is in order here.
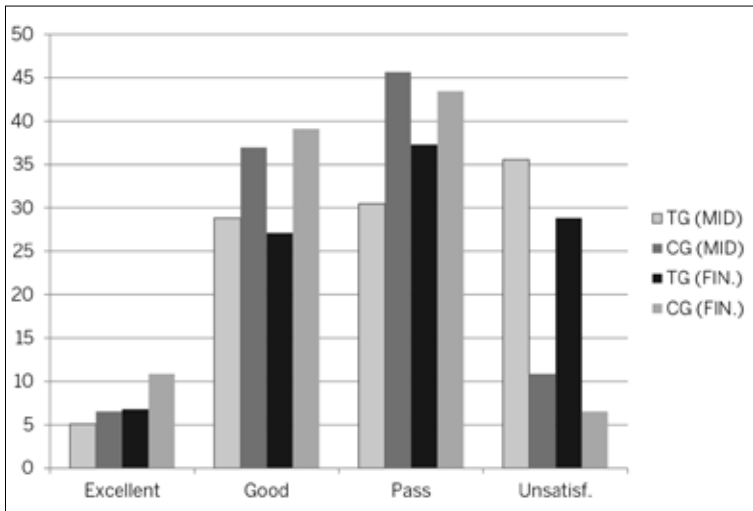

Figure 3. Discourse

5.1.4　Grammatical Structure

The situation with grammar was much more balanced. Though there was still progress from the first to the second test, the increases and decreases were not very sharp for any of the two groups of informants. Neither could significant differences be detected between the performances of the two groups, though the 'traditional' group underwent a slightly more marked improvement. The CLIL group showed an increase in 'pass', but a sharper decrease in 'unsatisfactory'. The predictions that the CLIL group, being more fluency-oriented, would have done worse in grammar were not borne out, possibly because of the above-mentioned reasons, or because a bit of explicit grammar was dealt with at the end of each lesson (see § 3 above). Apart from the pervasive placement of subjects in final position for focus reasons, more errors were made about morphological features than about syntactic features. Notice also that, while syntactic errors are generally attributable to L1 transfer, very few morphological errors are (cfr. for example word order with verb endings).
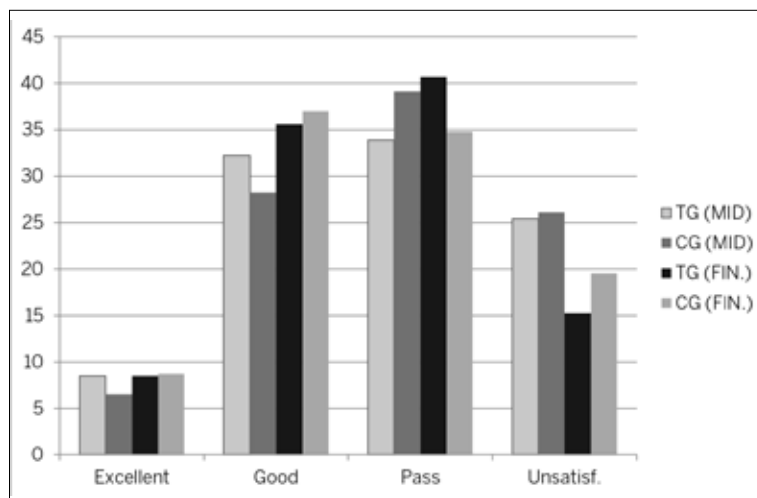

Figure 4. Grammar

5.1.5   Vocabulary

Vocabulary was a complex variable to assess, since we were not just in-
terested in whether each informant would recognize or use a word or
expression, but also in how, where and when they would (see 4.1). The
participants in the study proved to be particularly weak in this skill. As
was predictable, receptive knowledge of lexical items outdid by far ac-
tive production, not only because this is a natural feature for a speaker
of any language, but also, in particular, because English and Italian share
a considerable amount of vocabulary of Latin origin. Besides, the CLIL
group had undergone specific training in word recognition and meaning
deduction from context and co-text. The control group, however, appeared
to have developed a better capacity to actively store and retrieve lexical
items, to use them appropriately and vary their vocabulary. Therefore, as
can be seen in Fig. 5, the overall scores were more or less equivalent, with
the target group obtaining a lower percentage of 'good' but also a lower
percentage of 'unsatisfactory' (notice the sharp fall in the end-of-term
test). Besides, while the control group followed a more symmetric curve,
among the target informants there was a clear increase in 'pass' between
the two tests. 'Unsatisfactory' performances, on the other hand, did not
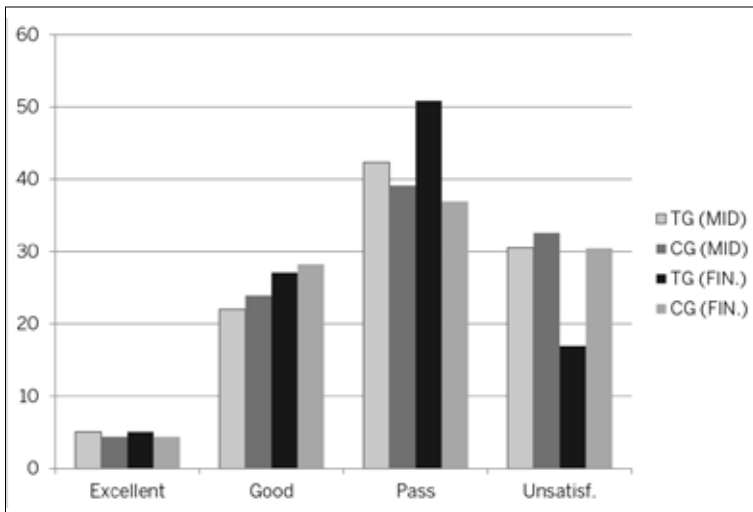decrease among the 'traditional' students.

Figure 5. Vocabulary

5.1.6   Pronunciation

English pronunciation has always been a weak point for Italian learners (cfr. Busà 1995; 2010; Azzaro 2001; Bosisio 2008; 2009; 2010), both for plain articulatory reasons and because of the heavy influence of the more regular Italian orthography on the rendition of target words and phrases, especially those of Latin origin. Besides, improvement in pronunciation is predictably less likely in monolingual classes, all the more so if the teacher too shares the common language with the students: abandoning L1 transfer (which in phonology is ever so clear and strong) is not particularly desirable, because it is not needed to improve communication (it could actually be an impediment to it), given that all communicators share with – or at least expect from – the other participants in the exchange the same type of L1 accent.

The results obtained in the tests bear out these conclusions: a very high percentage of 'pass' clearly contrasts with a low percentage of 'good' and 'excellent', especially among the CLIL informants. In fact, while the control group – even if maintaining a rather poor performance – underwent a steady improvement, the target group obtained less significant scores, with a rise in 'pass' and only a slight increase in 'good'. These results can be attributed to a less monitored use of the language on the part of the CLIL students, who were encouraged to focus on fluency and communication rather than on accuracy. Also, brief excursions into pronunciation issues were more frequent in the traditional than in the CLIL lessons. As for the different phonological features being observed, though typical segmental interference could be detected (mispronunciation of vowels, [h] deletion, substitution of dental stops for interdental fricatives, simplification of consonant clusters), suprasegmentals (especially stress placement) were farthest from target realizations for both groups and connected speech phenomena were virtually absent in most informants' utterances.
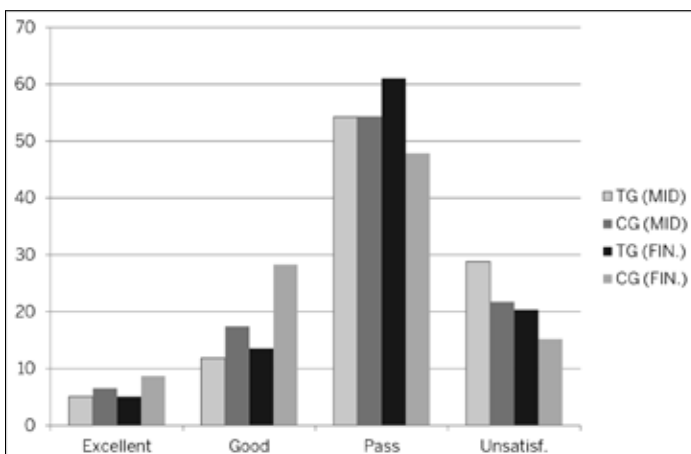

Figure 6. Pronunciation

5.1.7   Listening

Listening, like reading, is a linguistic skill that cuts across the previously mentioned linguistic modules, comprising phonological, grammatical, lexical, communicative aspects. Clearly, phonological skills are foremost when looking for specific information and listening for detailed comprehension, while listening for gist or understanding the general situation implies reference to the communicative context. In our school system, listening tends to be practiced little and badly (i.e. in very artificial ways) and Italian speakers have very few chances to get input outside school: the habit of watching films, shows or news in the original language has not caught on at all and listeners of songs in English seem to be more interested in the music than in the lyrics (personal observation).

   The results of the tests, however, show a sharp improvement in the CLIL students' performance, while the control group results are much steadier. The better performance of the target group may be due to the fact that listening activities in the CLIL course were more varied and purposeful, generally based on authentic materials. The use of musical and contextual cues was also more stressed in such lessons. It should also be noticed that the students who did well in listening were not always those who excelled in the other skills.
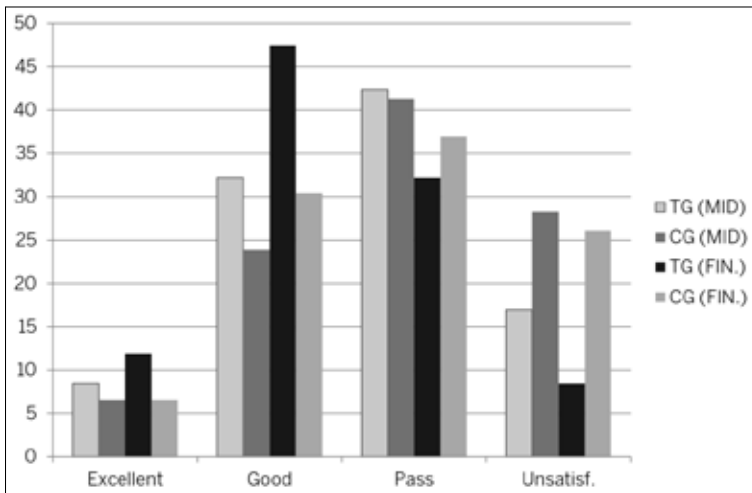

Figure 7. Listening

5.1.8   Reading

Reading comprehension, comprising once again different subskills such as reading for gist, scanning for particular information or answering detailed questions, is generally considered an 'easier' skill to acquire for the hyper-literate adult learner of our societies. First of all, reading can be readily practiced because written texts and hypertexts are available everywhere; secondly, psychological pressure is less strong than in the case of listening, because the learner can manage the text at more ease and work on it according to her/his own pace (remember, however, that the feature 'timing' was one of the variables considered in the study, see 4.1). Besides, many written words in English are very close to their translation in Italian, while their pronunciation may diverge considerably from that of the corresponding Italian lexemes.

These observations were confirmed by the outcomes of the tests, which show a very high percentage of 'good' with respect to 'pass' and 'unsatisfactory' scores. No significant differences between the target and the control group could be detected, while improvement was less evident than in other cases for both groups.
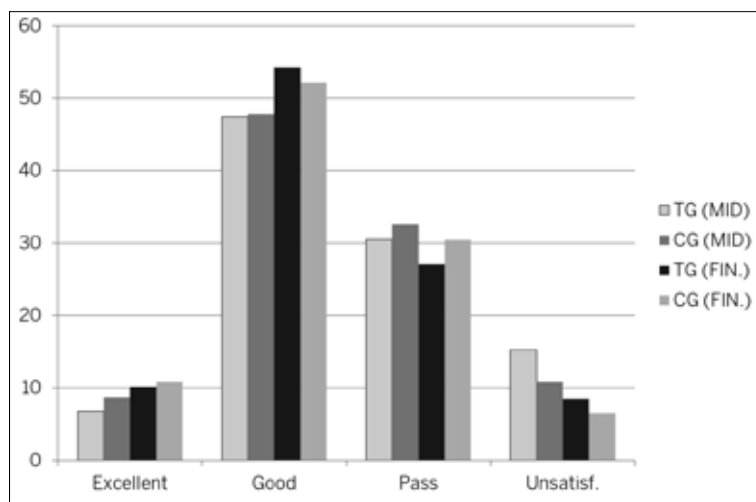

Figure 8. Reading

5.2   Systematic Observation

Observation notes generally confirmed what was shown in a more quan-
tifiable way from the test results. The superiority of the target group in
fluency and communication started to become evident around week 4 and
it seemed to steadily increase, in spite of the progress that the control
group was also making. Most CLIL students appeared to gradually accept
the idea that they should only speak English in class, assimilating idioms
and chunks that could help them conduct successful exchanges with their
peers and teacher. Pair- and team-work underwent an overall improve-
ment and active participation was generally extended to all members of
the group, though a few informants kept rather silent till the end of the
course. Communicative features like making oneself understood, asking
and answering questions and turn taking also improved at a faster rate in
the target group than in the control group. As the course went on, students
started to produce longer sentences, to hesitate less and speak faster,
though a small percentage of them continued to reply in monosyllables
and hardly ever initiated an exchange.

As for discourse and grammatical structure, improvement was much
less evident in both groups of informants. They continued to order words
and topicalize the Italian way, to miss out pronoun subjects in dependent
clauses, to produce the wrong anaphors and verb tenses, to find it difficult
to structure their discourses coherently. The CLIL students, in particular,
often produced long and fluent, but little cohesive texts. Morphological
features such as the third person *-s* or pronoun agreement continued to go
missing in many students' connected speech, disconfirming Dalton-Puffer's
(2008, p. 6) observations.

Vocabulary knowledge and use, as was said in 5.1.5, was rather poor for
both groups, especially as far as production was concerned. Students often
missed words belonging to such basic semantic fields as family members,
animals, classroom materials or adjectives describing simple feelings. Af-
ter such words were found and written down, they seemed to find it difficult
to retain them long term, in spite of the fact that, at least with the target
group, a lot of work was done on how to store and retrieve new vocabulary.
Collocations, especially those with prepositions, were subject to heavy
transfer from Italian, probably due to a bad habit derived from the common
teaching practice of translating lexical items one to one in isolation rather
than presenting them in chunks. As for vocabulary reception, the target
group seemed to undergo a more significant improvement because of the
variety of texts they were assigned and the meaning deduction techniques
that they were taught.

Pronunciation was clearly another weak point for both groups. Most
students did not seem to be motivated to produce native-like forms, both
because of their sharing the same mother-tongue (see 5.1.6) and because

of a certain shyness and fear of losing face. Many informants seemed to be aware of their bad pronunciation, but also seemed to take it for granted that there was nothing they could do about it. Apart from a pervasive distortion of segmental and suprasegmental features to resemble their closest Italian equivalents (e.g. pronunciation of [a] for [ˉ], of dental stops for alveolar ones, Italian intonation and stress patterns), sounds were regularly deleted (e.g. non-Italian [h], parts of consonant clusters) or substituted for, often under the influence of orthography (e.g. [t◁] F053] for [s] to render the grapheme ⟨c⟩, [i] for [a∩] and vice-versa), even when there was a similar sound in the Italian system. Connected speech features were virtually absent from most informants' speeches, or were replaced by typical Italian features (e.g. resyllabification of word-final consonants).

The CLIL students probably made the most striking progress in listening comprehension. They were faced with authentic texts that were generally very difficult to follow in detail, which seemed to disconcert them at first; very soon, however, many of them found that the presence of images, videos, pre-taught vocabulary or a pre-contextualized frame were of great help and learned how to exploit it. Besides, the tasks were carefully graded, sometimes being limited to a general understanding of the situation, or to the recognition of single words or concepts. More complex tasks, such as scanning for specific information or answering multiple choice or open-ended questions, were introduced gradually, and only when adequate contextual support was provided. Apart from a few cases, the informants responded very well to this approach, making good progress in spite of their level remaining lower than the target. The control group performance also improved, but to a much less impressive degree.

As for reading, as was said in 5.1.8, it was probably the favourite activity for all students from the start, because it is the one they are most used to. Nevertheless, good progress could be detected here, too, especially among CLIL learners. There were particular cases of students who found it difficult to perform the set tasks and to keep the classroom's pace because their English vocabulary was very limited, but they showed that the tasks themselves, when carefully graded, could help them solve comprehension problems, together with the assimilation of reading strategies such as the identification of key-words and –concepts and the use of contextual, grammatical, morphological, etymological and even phonological cues (e.g. in poetry). When they were assigned a written text, the CLIL students were often asked to work in pairs or groups, which had the advantages of making the activities more enjoyable and less threatening, of getting the learners to scaffold one another and to maximize student talking time.

6 Conclusions

On the whole, the informants that followed the CLIL programme seemed to improve more quickly than the traditional programme students. This is certainly due to the longer exposure to the language (60 hours rather than 40), but also and especially to the type of exposure. The more relaxed and friendly learning environment, the maximization of student talking time, the dual focus on language and content, the meaningfulness of interaction, the insistence on learning skills could not but have a positive influence on the learning process.

Apart from a slow start due to the weaknesses of the Italian school system as far as foreign language teaching is concerned, the only considerable problem the CLIL students encountered was substantially that of pronunciation, since discourse structure can probably be improved with more explicit noticing (cfr. Schmidt 1990), just like grammar. In the case of phonetic and phonological competence, integrating more explicit focus would also help students with noticing, but it is unlikely to be enough. Pronunciation is the first thing to get lost in the effort for meaning making, and exchanges in monolingual classes do not motivate learners to abandon their L1 accent. It is certainly possible to make the study of pronunciation more motivating, by means of ludic or task-based activities or by integrating it with other abilities. The most important step to be taken, however, is to give students the chance to communicate with native speakers of other languages by means of exchange programmes or computing platforms (e.g. e-twinning, Erasmus+).[6]

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6 `http://www.etwinning.net/it/pub/index.htm`; `http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_it.htm` (retrieved: 2015-01-16).

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