

E-TRAINING FOR THE CLIL TEACHER: E-TUTORING AND COOPERATION IN A MOODLE-BASED COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Maria De Santo
Anna De Meo

University of Naples, L'Orientale
mdesanto@unior.it, ademeo@unior.it

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The multicultural and plurilingual dimension of contemporary European society together with the growing interest in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) educational approach determined an increasing demand of methodological training for the CLIL teacher in Italy, also following the recent Educational Reform introducing CLIL instruction in upper secondary schools. This scenario encouraged the Orientale University to develop a blended methodological training course for CLIL teachers, integrating face-to-face activities with Web 2.0 virtual classrooms.

This paper focuses on the online component of the course as it offered teachers the opportunity to experiment with new training environments based on technology, interaction and collaboration.

Particular attention is given to the nature of the interactions among teachers and on the role of the e-tutor, acting as mediator and facilitator of learning and supporting the process of community building in the virtual learning

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environment.

Data collection and observation confirmed that online collaborative activities not only helped teachers acquire the methodological contents of the course but also contributed to the formation of an online community of learning that, with the constant presence of the e-tutor and the support of a well-structured virtual classroom, contributed to the success of the whole training programme.

1 Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a «dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language» (Coyle *et al.*, 2010, p. 1).

In Italy, the recent educational Reform introduced CLIL in upper secondary education at the final year of scientific and technical schools and from the third year of language-based schools; thus, students learn one or more subjects of the curriculum in a foreign language and at the same time they improve their language skills. In this specific context, CLIL teachers are subject teachers with an advanced level of competence in English (C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference); in order to teach their subject in the foreign language, they have to attend training courses providing the required linguistic and methodological competences.

With the aim of offering a course responding to the complex and growing demand of training for the relatively new role of the CLIL subject teacher in Italy, the Language Centre of the Orientale University of Naples, Italy, designed and implemented a blended methodological course for CLIL teachers integrating face-to-face seminars and workshops with online modules developed through the Moodle-based e-learning platform of the university.

The study, indeed, focuses on the online component of the training course, in particular on the importance of community building in the virtual learning space and on the central role of the e-tutor.

The wide theoretical framework of the CLIL approach together with Web 2.0 communication technologies and learning tools are at the basis of the virtual CLIL classroom, designed to deliver the online content of the training course.

2 The virtual CLIL classroom

Online training activities were delivered in a CLIL classroom implemented through Moodle, a Web 2.0 virtual learning environment providing students with interactive multimedia contents and communication tools fostering participation and collaboration.

The virtual classroom, indeed, offered materials, instructions and support from e-tutors and facilitated the sharing of ideas, experiences and skills. Trainee teachers had the opportunity to learn in a dynamic environment, experimenting,

through the resources offered, the peculiarities of the CLIL approach, integrating phases of guided autonomous learning with collaborative activities.

This online learning space was designed according to a common structure, that the authors have already experimented in other courses and virtual self-access centres available on the e-learning platform of the Orientale University, providing three main interconnected areas:

- a content area: where trainee teachers could find the learning materials (text, audio and video files) selected by tutors with the aim of focusing on the subjects of each module;
- a social area: based on chats, forums and wikis where teachers could interact with colleagues and e-tutors and complete their learning task;
- a metacognitive area: where teachers could find questionnaires, grids and surveys to monitor and evaluate tasks, learning activities and interactions and to give a feedback on the quality of the training offered.

This architecture also responded to the need of promoting autonomous learning abilities that could help trainee teachers not only acquire the specific contents of the course but also transfer these abilities to future training experiences, in a life-long learning perspective. In this guided environment, participants developed autonomy at first individually, by taking charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981) and then in group, through interdependence and collaboration in the social context (Murray, 2014) provided by the Moodle classroom. Each of the nine modules of the online component of the CLIL methodology training course followed three phases:

- exploration and study of the learning materials;
- discussion on the main themes of the module;
- e-task completion, evaluation and further discussion in the forum.

Interaction in the virtual classroom represented the core of the online learning activities. Through Web 2.0 communication tools, trainee teachers could participate in a flexible and active mode, initially, joining the group and socialising, then, gradually taking part in the new learning community, based on communication, interaction and sharing of ideas and experiences.

3 Online classroom interaction: from forums to collaborative e-tasks

Prior to the beginning of the online learning activities, was the formation of a virtual community of learning sharing the features of a community of practice, as defined by Wenger (2015, p. 1): «a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly». In this way, trainee teachers could share their skills and help each

other to reach a common objective through discussion and practice.

The teachers' pathway started with a first week of familiarization, guided by e-tutors, with the new online learning environment; this initial stage helped participants from a technical and social point of view, as it allowed them to practise with tools, strategies and conventions typical of an environment where communication is mediated by the computer (Herring, 1996; 2013).

The first step, indeed, was that of inviting participants, starting from e-tutors and other trainers, to complete their personal profile in the virtual classroom, with photos, presentations, previous experiences and personal interests. Teachers were also asked to complete an online preliminary survey, whose results were used by e-tutors in the forum to prompt an initial discussion about teachers' previous CLIL competences and experiences and their expectations about the course.

To promote interaction and collaboration, critical to community development (Palloff & Pratt, 2007), the tools of the Moodle platform, such as forums, chats and wikis were used in all the phases of the course both to deliver content and to facilitate collaborative interaction.

Forums, in particular, were of two kinds:

- formal forums, guided and monitored by the e-tutors where teachers had the possibility to discuss, interact and collaborate with other participants and to complete and share the activities and the e-tasks proposed by e-tutors for each module of the course;
- informal forums, such as the CLIL café, used with the aim of providing teachers with space for spontaneous and autonomous discussion.

Forum interactions among participants have been observed both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The number of interactions for each module and the kind of posts were categorized on the basis of the following general categories: discussion on the topic of the module, experience sharing, asking for/giving help to complete the task, asking for/suggesting materials for further studies, asking for/giving technical support, encouraging/motivating, solving conflicts/misunderstandings.

Interaction and collaboration among participants were further enhanced through the development of online tasks suggested to trainee teachers in order to stimulate individual and group accountability and positive interdependence (Johnson *et al.*, 1998), that is the awareness of being responsible for the success of the whole group. At the end of each module, teachers performed a final task, mostly based on cooperative online activities, aimed at assessing, from the part of e-tutors, the acquisition of the specific contents of the module. Based on the principles of Cooperative Learning and Task-Based Learning (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2007), these activities were often structured as WebQuests (Dodge,

1995), carried out through the forums and the wikis of the class, offering teachers the opportunity to put into practice the competences, strategies and techniques acquired during the online modules.

4 The role of the e-tutor: mediating and facilitating the learning process

In a virtual environment where the acquisition of knowledge and competences took place in an autonomous, active and constructive modality, the online tutors had the essential task of facilitating the learning process and mediating among the participants. The e-tutor, indeed, undertook the role of the e-moderator, that is «promoting human interaction and communication through the modelling, conveying and building of knowledge and skills» (Salmon, 2011, p. 4). The process of facilitating learning, interaction and collaboration was carried out through a series of strategies and techniques, that e-tutors constantly monitored through a self-evaluation questionnaire. This tool took the form of a checklist used to monitor and assess the actions gradually performed by e-tutors in the virtual classroom (De Santo, 2015):

- welcoming;
- creating a positive atmosphere;
- motivating and encouraging;
- scaffolding;
- informing, explaining and clarifying;
- interacting with trainee teachers in the forums;
- moderating conflicts;
- providing feedback;
- providing support.

Constant reflection on the techniques used and on the outcomes of the modules gave e-tutors the opportunity to diagnose possible problems regarding not only acquisition of contents but also communication and interaction in the learning space.

5 Methodology

The present study describes the online learning experience of a group of 35 subject-content teachers, with an upper-intermediate or advanced level of competence in English, coming from Human Sciences and Science-based upper secondary schools, involved in the methodological course for CLIL teachers. As mentioned before, the training activities were delivered in a Moodle-based virtual classroom and were implemented and monitored by two e-tutors.

Data collection was carried out through quantitative tools, such as

questionnaires, and qualitative tools, such as forum posts and e-tutors self-observation tools. Different tools were then employed at different stages of the course to monitor and evaluate both the learning process and the outcomes:

1. initial explorative questionnaire delivered before the starting of the activities during the first week of the online course, whose results were discussed in the online classroom with the e-tutors to reflect on learning needs, expectations, previous experiences and competences;
2. final questionnaire delivered at the end of each module, designed to enhance trainee teachers' metacognitive reflection (Cotteral & Murray, 2009) and to collect their opinion on content, activities and materials of each module;
3. observation of forum interaction in each module;
4. self-observation questionnaire used by e-tutors to monitor and evaluate tutoring and teaching strategies

5 Results and discussion

For the purpose of this paper, only data derived from forum observations and e-tutor monitoring checklists are object of discussion. Initial and final questionnaire results and e-tasks outcomes are not reported as they are not the direct focus of the study.

Online interactions in course forums were collected, analysed and categorised, according to the nature of the messages and their occurrence. Table 1 reports the number of posts for each of the nine modules (seven guided by the e-tutor and two autonomous), while Table 2 reports the kind of messages posted (left column) with the percentages of occurrence in the forums (right column):

Table 1
NUMBERS OF POSTS IN THE COURSE FORUMS

Module	Number of posts
1	84
2	86
3	73
4	85
5	92
6	105
7	70
8	28
9	38

Table 2
CATEGORIES OF MESSAGES AND RELATIVE PERCENTAGES OF OCCURRENCE

Forum interaction	Percentages
1. Discussing the topic of the module	58%
2. Sharing experiences	14%
3. Asking for/giving help to complete the task	6%
4. Asking for/suggesting materials for further studies	7%
5. Asking for/giving technical support	6%
6. Encouraging/motivating	5%
7. Solving conflicts or misunderstandings	4%

The number of posts in each forum demonstrates that participant interactions were constant; as regards modules 8 and 9 they have a lower number of messages because they were not guided by e-tutors and did not require participants' discussion about the topic of the module. A slight difference is evident in the sixth module, the one dedicated to Cooperative Learning. This module also showed an increasing of message posting in categories 3, 6 and 7 in the above Table 2, with a higher number of messages posted to give help in task understanding and completion, encourage and motivate colleagues, solve conflicts and clarify misunderstandings. Teachers' behaviour confirmed not only the acquisition of the strategies and techniques typical of this methodology but also the development of positive interpersonal relationships that are at the heart of the learning community (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

As regards the other tool implemented by e-tutors, the self-observation questionnaire described in Section 4, the main aspects that needed greater support from the part of e-tutors throughout the course were difficulties in interaction, unwillingness to communicate, shortcomings in cooperative work, obstacles to task understanding and completion or lack of motivation.

The self-observation tool allowed e-tutors to reflect on their role and activities with the aim of implementing further strategies useful to online learning in general and to this specific course in particular.

Conclusion

Constant observation of online interactions together with data collected from the questionnaires and final course outcomes helped the authors shed light on course achievement, while drawing a wider perspective on the efficacy of the training methodology, based on interaction and collaboration, applied in the online course.

The process of encouraging and guiding participants to build a virtual community of learning, the regular presence of online tutors scaffolding trainee

teachers since the beginning of the course, a virtual environment with learning tools and activities implemented to help teachers experiment in first person the specificity of CLIL methodology were some of the factors that facilitated the successful implementation and development of the training course.

As regards e-tutors, they acted on the basis of the wide literature on the subject that suggests the competences of tutors, the scaffolding strategies they have to put into practice and the methodology at the basis of their work. They adapted their competences to the specific environment of the online CLIL methodology training course: a course aimed at allowing teachers to experiment in an active way with new methodologies and environments of learning.

The positive feedback, also provided by final modules results and by final course project outcomes, encourages future experiences of blended training for CLIL teachers where online learning has the same relevance as face-to-face activities.

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