Content Teachers' Written Comments on Their Life-long English Language Profiles

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Received: August 19, 2017 Revised: October 3, 2017 Accepted: October 6, 2017

Published online: November 06, 2017

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Abstract CLIL in Italy has been compulsory by law since 2003 (Moratti's Law) for the last year of all secondary schools. Subject-matter teachers were chosen to be the CLIL teachers, and only in 2012 did methodological and linguistic training begin (provided by universities all over the country). This study explores the profile of content teachers attending CLIL training not in terms of their linguistic competence but in terms of their relationship with English as an additional language. To do so, 115 trainees were asked to fill in a questionnaire composed of 10 open-ended questions and 2 close-ended ones. This questionnaire had both a research and training goal, since it was submitted at the beginning of the training course to investigate content teachers' perceived linguistic profiles, which served as a psychological and pedagogical starting point for the course. Results show that content teachers have a specific linguistic identity and have had similar past experiences with the English language. These results could have repercussions and be exported to other training programmes, especially in terms of shifting teachers' personae from subject-matter to fully-fledged CLIL teachers.

Keywords: CLIL, identity, linguistic profiles

1. INTRODUCTION

CLIL is a methodological approach that is growing in Europe (Nikula, 2017), and Italy is a clear example of this trend. In fact, in secondary schools in particular, CLIL has received a noticeable boost since it was mandated by law (Moratti law 53/2003). This law requires all secondary schools to teach a subject or part of one in a foreign language during the last year of high school. In language high schools two subjects must be taught in a foreign language (one of which English) already starting in the third year.

This decision is still evolving, since it requires training for many teachers who are already teaching or are at the start of their career in order for them to become

Issues and Ideas in Education Vol-5, No-2 November 2017 pp. 143–154



CLIL teachers. Moreover, the law provides that only non-language subject-matter teachers can have such training provided by universities, even if on July 25, 2014, a document was published containing pedagogic guidelines, such as the creation of CLIL teams where English teachers are welcome to participate. Beginning in 2012, the first group of in-service teachers began their CLIL training (departmental decree 6/2012). The training activity has taken two paths: in-service training and incoming training (Aiello, Di Martino, Di Sabato, 2015).

With regard to in-service training (departmental decree of 16 April 2012 http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/e079c910-cc4e-4eab-b3db-fc9f8da55099/dd6_profilo_docenteclil.pdf), the admission criteria were: certification for teaching a non-language subject and a B1 level of English (with the goal of achieving a C1 level at the end of the training programme). The training entails both methodology as well as language. The methodological-didactic approach calls for 20 training credits and is open only to those already in possession of a C1 certificate.

The teachers' linguistic profile must show competence at the C1 level in the foreign language, appropriate linguistic skills in dealing with subject matters in a foreign language, a mastery of the micro-language of the subject, and the ability to treat disciplinary concepts and notions in a foreign language. The linguistic competences are well-defined in the same way that the requirements for entry into the methodological training programme are. However, the language competences are determined on certifications, not in terms of how the teachers participating in the training perceive their linguistic profile nor, above all, on their personal experience with English.

In this context, teacher training becomes a fundamental occasion to train teachers capable of applying a methodological approach such as CLIL. As Cammarata and Tedick (2012) have rightly noted, the transition from being a normal teacher to a CLIL teacher implies a true transformation of the teacher's persona. They speak of a true reconstruction in order to become a content and language teacher (Cammarata and Tedick, 2012:257) as well as an "identity transformation" and an "awakening" in this sense. Therefore, there must exist a true shift in a teacher's persona, and, since in Italy CLIL teachers are content teachers, this shift must occur through a greater awareness of the language aspect of CLIL. Normally the subject-matter teacher might not be so interested in dealing with the language aspect, which instead is essential for in CLIL (see in this regard the recent publication on the integration of language and content by Nikula, Dafouz, Moore and Smit, 2016). To produce this shift, Costa (2012) suggests an awareness raising given that language is important and already present in the lives of content teachers, an awareness that can be the starting point of a training programme in this regard.

The present study starts from these assumptions in an attempt to investigate the personal experience of content teachers as language learners, starting with their perceived linguistic profiles, and thus from reflecting on their identity as learners and users of English. Therefore, there is a twofold objective: on the one hand, to provide data on the perceived linguistic profile of CLIL teachers, and on the other a more pedagogical-didactic aim of serving as an instrument for teacher training, given that the study was planned at the start of CLIL training courses in two Italian universities.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will highlight studies on the identity and beliefs (the two concepts are similar but not overlapping) specifically with regard to CLIL teachers, since this context is quite singular. Teacher beliefs were studied in several countries: Finland (Moate, 2011, through six semi-structured interviews), Germany (Viebrock, 2013; Bonnet and Breidbach, 2017), Spain (Escobar Urmeneta, 2013, on the importance of reflection), Italy (D'Angelo, 2013), Japan (Sasajima, 2013), and jointly in Austria, Finland and Spain (Skinnari and Bovellan, 2016).

Few studies on the identity or beliefs of CLIL teachers exist, and for this reason Huettner, Dalton-Puffer and Smit (2013) express the hope for studies on the emic view of CLIL teachers in the various countries. In their article, for which they interviewed 48 teachers and students combined, they stated that they were motivated by the fact there are few top-down regulamentations for CLIL, even though CLIL is widespread at the bottom-up level. Thus, the beliefs of teachers are of particular interest, since "without addressing teachers' pre-existing beliefs, changes cannot successfully be implemented in teacher attitudes or behaviour" (2013: 269).

In certain ways, the situation in Italy (the focus of this study) is the opposite of that described by the above authors. In Italy, CLIL is mandated by law, and thus is regulated from the top-down. Nevertheless, and despite the fact teachers voluntarily participate in CLIL training, the importance of the perceived beliefs and identify of CLIL teachers is fundamental, especially given the fact that those being trained are all non-language content teachers. In their study based on 30 interviews, Bonnet and Breidbach (2017:273) describe a similar situation: "As the majority of CLIL teachers are either language or content specialists, the first challenge for most teachers is to acquire knowledge in the domain they have not studied". Viebrock (2013) sees a risk of *two-headed* teachers, thus requiring that training programmes lead to a change, which is possible only by modifying and recovering the attitudes and convictions (D'Angelo 2013; Huettner, Dalton-Puffer and Smit 2013; Viebrock 2013). In her research

involving a group of German CLIL teachers, Viebrock stressed that they were aware of the language aspects at play, though this awareness was never made explicit. This shift to explicitness is indeed part of the current study.

As previously said, no study has examined CLIL teachers as language learners through their perceived and experienced language profile. Skinnari and Bovellan (2016) did not study this aspect directly, but they pointed out that several of the teachers interviewed appeared to have participated in CLIL from interest in linguistic questions linked to English culture and language. They also stressed that their experience and personal relationship with English have undoubtedly influenced their beliefs. In their study on the perception of CLIL teachers in three countries, Austria, Finland and Spain, they identified several factors that influence beliefs: culture, educational background, prior knowledge, teaching experience, attitudes and expectations. The first three are dealt with in the present study.

D'Angelo (2013), the only one to have investigated the situation in both Spain and Italy, used narrative interviews of 34 teachers as a method of analysis. The CLIL teacher profile that emerged is one of a learner, a person who has worked with a foreign language linked to life experiences, one who is able to have relationships with the various actors in a school (parents, students and colleagues), and to experience an increase in self-respect.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study has a qualitative paradigm along with some quantitative elements regarding data analysis. A qualitative paradigm was chosen as it is the most suited to studies on the self-perception of teachers. From the methodological point of view, the study is innovative, in that it uses an open-ended questionnaire. All the other studies cited in the literature review section instead used interviews (e.g., Huettner, Dalton-Puffer and Smit 2012; Skinnari and Bovellan 2016) or biographical narrations (D'Angelo, 2013). Interviews clearly allow the researcher to explore in depth the views of teachers, but they do allow for a large sample size of the population being studied. Instead, this study uses the questionnaire as a tool, partly because more respondents can be reached while at the same time the biographical and emic information of teachers can be maintained through the use of open-ended questions which allow for a greater wealth of qualitative data (Dörnyei, 2003). The study had a pilot phase involving 57 teachers.

3.1 Sampling

The sample used in the study (115 teachers of non-language subjects, 83 from public schools and 32 from private ones) is made up of groups of teachers

involved in methodology training in CLIL at two Italian universities. The sample size (115) is comprised of teachers from the humanities and science areas. Moreover, there are 3 groups of trainees: the first from 2013, the second from 2015, and the third from 2017. The sample included all teachers who were present on the day of the questionnaire submission therefore the study was aimed at the whole population of CLIL trainees but only the ones who attended that day compiled it. The sample of teachers who were present on the day of the submission all decided (freely) to fill in the questionnaire.

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Given the type of data collected, a content analysis (Gillham, 2000; Dörnyei, 2003) was used, with the answers grouped according to macro themes. There was wide variety in the number of respondents and their answers: in fact, several answered only one question, while others all of them. Moreover, as the questions were open-ended teachers sometimes gave more than one answer to one question. Each of these answers was counted singularly. Account was taken of answers with equal content representing at least 10% of teacher responses. Below this threshold the data were not considered to be indicative.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire was administered in paper form to the teachers present on the date of the group administration. All teachers present in each training course on that day handed in the questionnaire. Therefore, there was a 100% response rate.

The questionnaire was given in Italian and translated into English. It was totally anonymous so as to guarantee all forms of privacy. For this reason anagraphical information was not requested of the participants.

All the questions were of the attitudinal variety (Dörnyei, 2003) since they tried to investigate the views of teachers regarding their relationship with English. The first ten questions were entirely open-ended, while the last two were close-ended (multiple choice). The questions were as follows: 1. How did you first come into contact with English?; 2) What type of formal study of English have you had?; 3) What type of informal study of English have you had?; 4) What personal contact do you have with English countries, their people or culture?; 5) What difficulties have you always had with English?; 6) In which areas would you like to improve?; 7) What does a "language" signify for you?; 8) Have you ever used English for your subject area? When? How was the experience?; 9) Have you ever been abroad? Where and when?; 10) Have you ever had an English teacher who had a memorable effect on you?; 11) Do you consider yourself open to new challenges and to change? (yes, no, at times); 12) Do you usually like to collaborate with your colleagues? (yes, no, at times).

Besides the fact that the questionnaire had previously been piloted, it was in some way validated by the fact that the results were communicated to the teachers in question after the questionnaire was administered. Therefore, it was a sort of member check, since the questionnaire was intended to be a tool of pure research as well as one of training, which would serve as a starting point to increase awareness and to elicit explicitness with regards to the English language in teacher trainees.

4. RESULTS

Since the questionnaire was mainly open-ended, for each question a content analysis of common core themes was performed. For each core theme the number of answers were counted and the relative percentage calculated. The data analysis is divided into two sections. The first concerns the total number for each macro theme group resulting from the questionnaire given to the teachers. The second concerns the discursive analysis of some of the comments of the teachers, given that the open-ended questionnaire allowed the teachers to freely express their thoughts, thereby providing a wealth of qualitative narrative data.

4.1 Content Analysis and Percentages

There were 81 answers (70.4%) to the first question (How did you first come into contact with English?), indicating that teachers came into contact with English through school, which thus represents a fundamental place for the development of their language profile. Regarding question 2, 84 (73%) of the answers said that the place of their formal language learning was the level-two secondary school, while 22 (19.1%) said it was the university; there was no mention of the level-one secondary school. Nevertheless, when asked to mention a memorable English teacher (question 10), the difference between first- and second-level secondary schools is not so marked. In fact, 25 (21.7%) mentioned their high school teacher, 25 (21.7%) their language certification teacher. However, many of the answers, 52 (45.2%) said there was no teacher that made a particular impact on them.

As far as the informal learning of English is concerned (question 3), 30 (26%) answered reading, 45 (39.1%) trips to English-speaking countries, and 21 (18.2%) British or American films. Informal learning was thus identified with the culture of the country/countries whose language was being studied. Personal contact with English-speaking countries, people and culture (question 4) occur through friends (42 answers, 36.5%) or foreign colleagues (21 answers, 18.2%). For 12 of the trainees (10.4%), these links are established

through trips to English-speaking countries, while for 13 teachers (11.3%) the contact comes through culture as a whole (a clear reference to question 3). This question is linked to question 9 which shows that the teachers comprising the sample are very interested in and enthusiastic about other cultures in and of itself. Seventy-nine (68.6%) answered that they had been abroad several times to various countries, and 22 (19.1%) had even studied and lived abroad.

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With regard to difficulties in learning English (question 5), the most common problem (51 responses, 44.3%) is with spoken English, followed by listening comprehension (35, 30.4%), pronunciation (19, 16.5%), and vocabulary (13, 11.3%). Speaking and listening are the areas where teachers have more difficulty, but which perhaps represent language skills they would use the most in a CLIL setting.

The answers to question 6 (In which areas would you like to improve?) are closely linked to the previous question. Forty-one answers (35.6%) indicated spoken English, 30 (26%) listening, 26 (22.6%) speaking skills. It is curious to note that fluency is separated from speaking skills; nevertheless, the mention of it demonstrates once again the high level of awareness of the teachers in this group. The importance attributed to vocabulary could be linked to the fact that for content teachers this area, in particular specific lexis, is of fundamental importance in the flow of speech in the subject they teach.

Language is defined (question 7) as communication (48,41.7% of answers), culture (28, 24.3%), and thought (12, 10.4%). A large range of definitions was provided, but the fact the most common was communication indicates the teachers have the right frame of mind for CLIL.

The responses to question 8 reveal that the teachers (71, 61.7%) have used English to teach their subjects and that they view this as a positive experience. On the other hand, 13 teachers (11.3%) have never applied CLIL or a similar approach. On the whole, however, the responses reveal that many of the teachers already had some familiarity with CLIL.

The last two questions (Do you consider yourself open to new challenges and to change?; Do you usually like to collaborate with your colleagues?) reveal a positive self-image in the teachers. In fact, 97 (84.3%) of them answered yes to the first question and 93 (80.8%) yes to the second.

4.2 Discursive Analysis From Excerpts

This section will provide some examples of the teachers' comments, since they were able to freely express their thoughts in response to the open-ended questions. Such comments have no statistical validity (even if they are in line with most of the given answers), but they do give us a glimpse of the linguistic profile of the teachers. Some answers were very concise and will not

be referenced here. The comments were coded based on whether the teachers taught at private high schools (P), state schools (S), and on the year of the group cohort (2013, 2015, 2017).

The first question (how the teachers came into contact with English) produced two interesting comments. It is interesting to note that these teachers were (probably unconsciously) themselves CLIL students (one with a Master's degree entirely done in English and the other using scientific English for his studies). The first case illustrates how a learner's experience with a language as a medium of instruction has repercussions on the language in question as well as on other languages. In some way it seems to have caused an intercultural opening.

I have a Master's degree done entirely in English, which led to my passion for communicating in English or in any other language (P2017).

I have a high school diploma in languages. After my bachelor's degree in biology I did a doctoral programme in experimental pathology; it is well known that science speaks English, and so I gained confidence with scientific English. I also worked for three years for a research company, and all the experimental data and new research proposals had to be presented in English (P2017).

As far as the third question (on informal learning) is concerned, two comments emerge. The first mentions movies in the original language. The teacher's self-learning strategy is to use English subtitles (intralinguistic subtitling), while the other does not adopt this approach. Clearly the use of strategies for learning a language assume an interest in the language; however, if this interest is not explicit or conscious, the teacher trainees may not be aware of it.

For eight years I have watched films only in the original language (normally without subtitles) (P2017).

I regularly read books or magazines in English and watch films or other programmes in English (normally with English subtitles) (S2015).

For question 4 regarding relations with English-speaking people, a teacher rightly notes that he/she does not use English only with native speakers but also as a lingua franca with non-native speakers.

I have some colleagues from English-speaking countries, but even contacts with people from other countries are in English (and obviously I write scientific articles in English) (S2015).

As for the question regarding difficulties in learning English, some gave very creative answers using the metaphor of thinking in reverse to indicate the great effort needed to use another language. Another teacher instead described

the tendency to think in Italian as an obstacle to speaking. Both comments revealed a deep reflection on the teachers' own linguistic profile.

Everything! To me English is a distant language, with a thought process that runs in reverse (P2017).

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Listening comprehension, especially AE. Even speaking is slightly problematic, since I tend to "think" in Italian. I also worry a lot about pronunciation (S2018).

In answering the question on the language aspect they would like to improve, almost all the teachers mentioned pronunciation (in terms of both speaking and listening), or even understanding of the different accents. The comments reveal once again an interest in and special attention to language by the teachers.

Listening, especially as regards the regional varieties of English (S2015).

Pronunciation, even if at my age I have developed an imperfect way of expressing myself (P2017).

To have a less Italian "accent" (P2017).

Very creative answers were given to the question on what the teachers understood by language. At times the answers were even poetic, as in the following two instances.

Language is the understanding of a world. Speaking a foreign language means intimately experiencing the culture expressed by the language (P2017).

A system of expression that is identified with a particular culture (S2015).

Both positive and negative aspects emerge from the comments on the question about previous CLIL experience. The first example shows the aspect of going beyond one's limits, in that using an L2 means adopting a different frame of mind.

Yes, CLIL: this experience tests you in a positive and negative way. We are confronted with our own limits (P2017).

In the second example, after a positive comment the teacher emphasises the scepticism of the students (an aspect not mentioned often or researched in the literature). This comment also highlights the feeling of inadequacy of the teacher, who is not sure he/she has used the proper methodology (this aspect is, on the contrary, quite evident in the literature).

It is stimulating, but the students are fairly sceptical. This amuses me, and when I can, I make use of it, but not always according to the CLIL methodology (S2015).

The third example brings out another critical aspect in the literature: the risk that content will be simplified.

Yes, mainly in the third and fourth years of the language high school. Positive, but at first requiring a lot of effort. I seemed to be simplifying the content too much (P2017).

In answering the question about a particularly memorable English teacher, many of the respondents (see the number of teachers who responded) said they had never had a memorable teacher. The following two comments on a native and a non-native speaker reveal the positive side ("he made me view English from a different point of view" and "he gave me a desire to study English").

Yes, in the first CLIL course in English I had a mother-tongue teacher that made me view English from a different point of view (S2013).

Yes, he spoke a very "Italianised" English, but he nevertheless gave me a desire to study the language, even after many years. (S2015).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As far as the data in general are concerned, there are no differences among the various groups or even among public and private schools. Moreover, the data are very similar to that from the pilot study. As regards a joint analysis of the number of answers and the comments to the open-ended questions, common themes can be noted.

In most cases, the first contact with English is at school, which underscores the important responsibility of schools in this regard. The language profile that emerges from the study is one of interest in and attraction toward countries and cultures other than our own, as if the learning path in English has led teacher trainees to open themselves at the intercultural and multilinguistic levels (see also D'Angelo, 2013; Skinnari and Bovellan, 2016). The insecurities that emerged regarding their mastery of English (above all, spoken English and listening comprehension) are a sign of real problems with the language, but at the same time indicate a capacity (probably unconscious) to reflect on language and a high level of interest in and attention to the language. This interest is also revealed in answers to the question on what language means to them, which shows an almost poetic view of language. The teachers indicated they often used English for their doctoral studies or work before they began teaching. Moreover, most of them had already used CLIL and are both enthusiastic and concerned at the same time about English. This sense of inadequacy is an integral part in becoming a CLIL teacher, which often entails having to leave one's comfort zone (Costa, 2014).

It should be kept in mind that, as this was a qualitative study, it is not possible to make generalisations about the results and this represents a limitation; however, it is possible to give methodological indications on how to set up a CLIL teacher training course. In fact, the initial questionnaire and the final comments of the teachers turned out themselves to be an instrument of training and this is an original and innovative finding. The questionnaire made it possible to gain awareness of the extent to which English is an integral part of the interests and life of the trainees, which is indispensable for transforming them into CLIL teachers. This awareness helped the teacher trainees to recall that they, too, were (and still are) learners of English. As the questionnaire forced them to explicitly consider their thoughts, they were able to rediscover their identity as English language learners, which made them more sensitive to the hypothetical language problems their students will have to deal with. However, an awareness of the fact that most of the teacher trainees were not only learners of English but CLIL learners did not emerge only from the questionnaire. In fact, many of them had already used English as a medium if instruction in their past studies, an aspect they were completely unaware of until they had gotten back the questionnaire.

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Finally, the last two, close-ended questions revealed groups of teacher trainees open to change and collaboration with others, as if, in some way, there has been from the start a self-selection of CLIL teachers. This area is definitely worth studying in further research.

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