

An Interdisciplinary Module to teach English and Business Organization in a University-Level Vocational Course

Un módulo interdisciplinario para enseñar inglés y organización de empresas en un curso universitario de formación profesional

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to outline a cooperative project between an English for Specific Purposes practitioner and a teacher of Business Organization, implemented for the undergraduate degree in Gastronomic Sciences at the University of Messina (Italy). The project's main purpose was to raise students' awareness on the use of English as a means of professional communication through team teaching. The general plan consisted of three different steps: it started with exposure to a chosen topic, the life cycle of business organizations (presented first by the content teacher in the mother tongue, and then in English by the foreign language practitioner), and finally through team-teaching with concurrent use of the L1 and L2. Learner evaluation was performed through oral examinations. The results showed an increase of proficiency in the target foreign language, as well as in the topic content and in oral skills.

Key Words: CLIL; team teaching; English for Special Purposes; Business English; Business Organization; oral communication.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es esbozar un proyecto de cooperación entre un profesional de Inglés para Propósitos Específicos y un profesor de Organización de Empresas, desarrollado para la licenciatura en Ciencias Gastronómicas de la Universidad de Messina (Italia). El principal objetivo del proyecto era sensibilizar a los estudiantes en el uso del inglés como un medio de comunicación profesional a través de la enseñanza en equipo. El plan general estuvo conformado por tres etapas distintas: se inició con la exposición de un tema elegido: el ciclo de vida de las organizaciones empresariales (presentado por primera vez por el profesor de contenido en la lengua materna, y luego en Inglés por el profesional de lengua extranjera), y finalmente a través de la enseñanza en equipo con el uso simultáneo de la L1 y L2. La evaluación de los estudiantes se realizó a través de exámenes orales. Los resultados mostraron un aumento de la competencia en la lengua extranjera, así como en el contenido del tema y en las destrezas orales.

Palabras Claves: AICLE; enseñanza conjunta; Inglés para Propósitos Especiales; Inglés de Negocios; Organización de Empresas; comunicación oral.

¹ Although both authors conceived and approved the final form of this paper, R. Coppolino is principally responsible for the Results and Evaluation and Conclusion sections, while E. Cianflone is principally responsible for the other sections.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized society, English is the medium of communication among speakers of different mother tongues in many professional fields (Jenkins, 2007; Hyland, 2009). In higher education (HE) contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), this Anglo-centric situation asks language practitioners to go beyond teaching practices pivoted on General English instruction and to found training activities on the specialized discourses and on the communicative practices required by the world of work (Hyland, 2006; Solly, 2008), namely the ability to use English as a contact language with speakers from different linguistic backgrounds and to code-switch (from L1 to L2, and *vice versa*) for professional purposes.

To answer these specific linguistic needs, the implementation of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) models is a pedagogical approach frequently employed in educational settings and promoted by the European Community to spread foreign language proficiency among community members (Lasagabaster, 2008). CBI, also known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and other umbrella terms (Haataja, 2007) such as Content-enhanced Teaching, Bilingual Integration of Language and Disciplines (Lasagabaster, 2008), is seen by many language educators as an alternative to traditional curricula (Cammarata, 2009). The rationale behind CBI projects gains pedagogical grounds in its "constant interplay" (Stryker and Leaver, 1997, p. 6) between foreign language and content that can produce a tripartite set of benefits: on learners, on HE institutions and on teachers.

With regards to students, CBI improves their command of the target language (TL) by boosting their motivation to learn, thus leading to the acquisition of field-specific vocabulary and of written and oral skills, to the reinforcement of content knowledge, and to the enhancement of intercultural communication skills, thereby preparing learners for the European dimension of mobility in exchange study programs or the labor market (Corrales and Maloof, 2009; Lasagabaster, 2008; Song, 2006; Stryker and Leaver, 1997).

CBI offers benefits in higher education institutions, since this approach fosters pedagogical research and can help university boards to revise curricula and shape them on truly learner-centered standards. Additionally, this approach develops interdisciplinary and didactic research by facilitating the implementation of educational projects and teaching materials based on learners' educational needs (Horn et al., 2008).

CBI benefits teachers, as well, because it offers the possibility of rethinking or revising their own ideas on teaching or on education, together with their working practices, thus leading to self-improvement and to a higher degree of professional growth (Horn et al., 2008; Perry and Stewart, 2005).

Among the gains CBI offers—a feature which, to authors' knowledge, has not so far been reported in EFL contexts—is that the interaction between language and content can be a medium to prepare students in university-level vocational courses to use English as a contact language with other non-native speakers and to code-switch for professional purposes.

Redressing the lack of research on this educational issue, this paper discusses how team teaching, in the form of collaboration between English language and Business Organization teachers, was used in one experimental didactic module for the degree in *Gastronomic Sciences*. Some results drawn from evaluation of the learners' final language exam are presented (though excluding quantitative analyses on linguistic gains, as such would have been outside the scope of the project).

To contextualize the learning environment and the decisions teachers took to shape this team teaching trial, discussion begins with the description of the university degree where the

teaching module was developed; then, the implementation steps are examined, and the learning outcomes are sketched.

THE DEGREE IN GASTRONOMIC SCIENCES

The degree in *Gastronomic Sciences* is an undergraduate three-year course set up by the Universities of Messina and Reggio Calabria (Italy) following the higher education reforms encouraged by the Italian Ministry of University and Education to align Italian academia with European standards.

The curriculum, shaped through the cooperation of seven different faculties (Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Biological Sciences, Pharmacy, Economics, Law, and Agronomic Sciences), focused on the study of food and nutrition; food production, storage and distribution; food evaluation and control; economics; marketing; Mediterranean food-and-wine traditions; regional and niche products; and food-related national and European regulation. The syllabus is organized around foundational disciplines (General, Organic, and Inorganic Chemistry; Biology; and Zoology), distinctive disciplines (Microbiology, Human Anatomy, Lab Analysis, Food Analysis, and Food Processing), cognate disciplines (Business Organization, Food Inspection, Catering, Economics, Marketing, and Italian and European regulations), and optional disciplines (social history of food, mineral water specifications). The course is developed through lectures, problem-based activities, case studies, seminars, visits to manufacturing industries, and attending conventions focused on food and related fields of study. A compulsory placement experience, in Italy or abroad, is intended to broaden learners' professional skills and to provide input for their final project work.

The course aims at training personnel with manifold theoretical and practical skills: practitioners specialized in issues like food quality evaluation, food control, and hazard analysis, working in catering or in the manufacturing industry; spokesmen interested in starting a career in food-related areas like gourmet journalism; and dealers working as manufacturers' agents in Italy or abroad.

The English language course, allocated in the second semester of the freshman year, is assigned a total amount of 52 contact hours. English classes, targeted at the B1/B2 level of the Common European Framework—that is, at the “independent user level” (Council of Europe, 2001)—are scheduled in a context where main lectures are given in Italian. The learning group consists of a non-homogeneous set of freshmen from different secondary school backgrounds, with mixed EFL proficiency levels, and often still struggling with secondary-school level study habits (Cianflone, 2010).

THE PROJECT

The highly vocational learning context of the *Gastronomic Sciences* degree, the widespread use of English as a contact language among international speakers (Hyland, 2009), required the language teacher to regard the specialized discourse and professional communicative practices as main concerns. Specifically, the educational objectives had to consider the globalized demands from the world of work that students will encounter after graduation by developing not only their EFL proficiency but also their expertise in discussing food-related matters and in code-switching for professional purposes in front of an international multilingual audience (Cianflone, 2010).

The drawback emerging from this situation, which is common in many EFL countries where mainstream lectures are delivered in the mother tongue (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns,

1998), is that freshmen find it difficult to consider the EFL activities worth the effort; their delayed linguistic needs are, in fact, too detached from their present learning situation so that they are not fully aware of the impact of English as a contact language on their future career (Cianflone, 2010; Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009). To overcome the motivational weakness, the first educational goal considered in syllabus design was to guide students to the realization that English is a useful medium of communication in their profession and not a set of compulsory classes needed to pass an exam. Although pivoting learning activities on topics taken from content areas and to develop them for communicative teaching purposes is a common practice in EFL education, the general idea in the EFL syllabus designed for the *Gastronomic Sciences* degree was to find inter-disciplinary cooperation to shape one CBI module with activities based on topics taken from other majors, thus blending content and foreign language (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009).

Three factors in CBI may hinder the implementation of team teaching. The first of these is the lack of readily available teaching materials (Cammarata, 2009), as CBI projects often originate from a specific learning context that asks for teaching resources developed in-house. The second constraint is the lack of interactional exchange among language and content teachers (Horn et al, 2008), which impedes the development of interdisciplinary expertise on the language practitioner's side. The third issue that can affect CBI realization is the difficulty of evaluating results both in the target language and the subject-matter content, since the expected learning outcomes may differ within the disciplines object of CBI plans (Horn et al, 2008).

To meet the EFL learning goals peculiar to the *Gastronomic Sciences* degree discussed above, and to shape a team-taught module, collaboration was obtained from the Business Organization (BO) teacher. Collaborative ventures of this kind are often problematic because they ask educators to tread specific paths, often outside personal fields of specialization, as was the case in the present module where two experts from different subject areas came together. Such endeavors involve, on both teachers' side, risk-taking propensity, eagerness to collaborate, mutual respect, open minds, and flexibility (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns 1998; Jordan, 1997; Horn et al, 2008). Additionally, on the content teacher's side, there has to be an interest in the target language, particularly with regard to its communicative use as a contact language (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009).

The team-taught venture object under present discussion, apart from the personal features discussed above, was also favored by one other internal factor: the presence of both teachers on the same examination board. This last was a significant aspect that helped the team members to evaluate students' educational gains in the final oral exam.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

The module was implemented into four steps.

The first step aimed at finding a topic on which the project could be built up by a careful examination of the BO syllabus to find suitable topics. From this inspection it emerged that a good common subject was the *life cycle of business organizations*. The theme satisfied the EFL teacher because it could be used for language exploitation activities in terms of grammar (for example, the present/past/future tenses, and the use of adjectives) and specialized vocabulary (see Table 1 and Table 2 below for restricted samples). It also satisfied the BO teacher since this theory has a good face value to describe the evolution of entrepreneurial organizations from the very beginning to their maximum expansion.

The issue of a common topic is of paramount importance in CBI projects, because the collaboration with content specialists, acting as informants (Jordan, 1997), allows the exploitation of specific terminology, thus assisting language experts in fields generally outside their basic training revolving around Applied Linguistics and EFL teaching issues (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009). The theory of the life cycle of commercial organizations, discussed by Greiner's research in 1972, draws a parallel with growth among human beings (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009). Greiner, in his well-known paper, highlights that entrepreneurial activities undergo five evolutionary stages from start-up to expansion and to contingent decay and re-organization. In his model, Greiner highlights that each phase is characterized by two factors: age and size. These peculiarities are interwoven with management styles and can meet periods of expansion (or evolution) and contraction (or revolution) that affect the organization's structure, the product/services offered, business innovation, the commercial strategies and the profit-making goals in a positive or in a negative way (Greiner, 1972).

Once the common topic was fixed on, the second step was to get an appropriate text in English around which to build lectures. The selection of English materials took a longer time because this activity is the most important part of any CBI plan and a time consuming one. Success or failure of CBI projects is, in fact, deeply influenced by the resources available for the learners to work on. Texts have to be sound from a disciplinary point of view; they must also bring educational benefits to ensure growth in foreign language proficiency and should be deemed meaningful by learners to their learning efforts. Since specialist literature is not written for language teaching purposes (Jordan, 1997), a English text was developed that followed three reference works: Daft (2007), Greiner (1972), and Sundarasaradula and Hasan (2005). Our texts consisted of a general description of the model in terms of birth/growth/ expansion/decay or re-organization; it pivoted around the principal layers on which any organization is based: namely, the structure, the products or services offered, the control system, the organizational innovation, the business goals and the management styles, as suggested in Daft (2007).

The third step concerned lecture design and had to account for timetabling and internal organization. Team members decided to deliver contents first in Italian (4 hours), then in English (4 hours) and, lastly, in two team-taught lectures (3 hours each) (Cianflone et al., 2010). Specifically, the Business Organization teacher lectured in Italian on the chosen topic paying attention to contents and to technical vocabulary. Some days later, the language teacher exploited the same topic by using the English text that had been previously developed for the course. The EFL lectures were focused on overall comprehension of the English text, on the specific vocabulary and lexis activities peculiar to the economic field; some grammar cues, like word formation and the use of verbal tenses together with adjectival position, were also revised. The overall comprehension of the passage and its specific lexis was facilitated by prior exposure to the content in the mother tongue, thus corroborating the suggestion that competence in foreign languages can be improved if students can rely on content knowledge already acquired in other disciplines. The team-taught lectures aimed at widening students' communication skills through topic revision in both languages and through code-switching activities with general and specific questions, posed by both teachers, on the different stages described by Greiner's model and on examples taken from well known Italian and foreign companies (such as a famous computer company, a free online encyclopedia, and many Italian and European automobile industries).

The fourth, and last step, regarded evaluation and will be dealt with in the following section.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

In the literature, the term evaluation creates confusion since it is used both to describe the assessment of learning outcomes for a given educational scheme and to evaluate projects themselves (Nunan, 1992); therefore, a distinction is necessary. Here, we use *assessment* to refer to strategies implemented to measure “what learners were able to do in the target language” (Nunan, 1992:185), while we use *evaluation* to describe a more product-oriented action that aims at determining whether a course meets the educational objectives set at the beginning of any teaching venture and to suggest, if needed, re-shaping actions. Both assessment and evaluation are very critical aspects in any CBI plan to test its validity. Although different methods are available to project members (for an overview, see Nunan, 1992), following Kirkpatrick (1994), we decided to organize evaluation in four steps: namely reaction, learning, behavior, and results.

Kirkpatrick’s model, first developed by its author in the 1950s as a Ph.D. project, has served to measure results in any training action, and over the years it has undergone many revisions to align expected outcomes with the ever-changing world of business organizations (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2009). Our format consists of four different levels that can be used to check adherence to some predetermined learning goals and success indicators. The first level elicits participants’ reactions to the training program; the second level checks benefits in terms of knowledge and competences; the third tests how skills obtained from the educational plan are used by participants; and the last level highlights the overall profits resulting from the educational action and whether they are in line with the organization’s goals and strategies.

With regard to students’ gains in the target language, the golden standard would have been to assess their use of language after graduation within working contexts. Considering this is a difficult goal for a module developed for the first year of a higher education curriculum, it was decided to assess students’ proficiency in English not through administering written texts but by appraising their oral performance in an end-of-course examination.

The chosen parameters for this assessment of English language oral production were set in terms of fluency, presentation skills and self-confidence. These choices were aligned with the *Gastronomic Sciences* degree regulations, and with a peculiar Italian tendency for oral university exams (Lombardo, 2004). In our case, the presence of both teachers on the same examination board facilitated evaluation of the project’s impact on the learning of both the target language and Business Organization content, as well as course evaluation. Additionally, the administering of written exams was ruled out to discourage any idea among the students that this module served the aim of assigning them such an examination in disguise (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009).

In some instances, written questionnaires can be useful to capture learners’ opinions, but it was decided not to do this because this method can lead subjects to either show off or to leave some items unanswered (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns, 1998; Nunan, 1992). We decided, instead, to interview learners through an informal and friendly chat. From such talks, it emerged that students appreciated the CBI project because it gave them a good amount of confidence in their foreign language skills and because it made the overall comprehension and discussion of the English text easier, thanks to the previous exposure to content (Cianflone and Coppolino, 2009). Such a positive reception was deemed by both teachers to be a good result in line with the overall goals of the project: that is, to let students realize English language classes are not merely a abstract academic requirement but a medium through which to understand the added value of proficiency in this language for their future careers.

With regards to Kirkpatrick's second level, that is the benefits in terms of knowledge and competences obtained by participants, our results can be divided into two different parts: the impact of EFL learning on the learning of Business Organization, and *vice versa*.

Impact of EFL learning on Business Organization learning

The CBI module was an opportunity to encourage English language use by providing meaningful tasks embedded within topics related to students' field of study. In the team-teaching phase, learners realized that English was an effective medium to discuss topics in a communicative way, recognizing that even "un-grammatical" forms do not always impede oral production (Vasquez, 2010) and can foster communication in international settings, where mutual understanding is as important as adherence to any native speakers linguistic perfection. Specifically, the CBI project helped students to expand their *knowledge and comprehension skills* by realizing how many English nouns there are in Italian in the form of loanwords (for example, *management, benchmarking, blue chips, and futures*).

Impact of Business Organization learning on EFL learning

The CBI module offered many benefits to EFL acquisition. First of all, it improved learners' communication skills by developing a novel communicative aptitude differing from their experience in secondary school, where the language activities and the oral interactions in the target language mainly consisted of rote-learning drills and passive response to the requests. It facilitated the acquisition of interdisciplinary skills and of specific communicative practices linked to their field of study. It also facilitated code-switching practices, a very useful skill when in the world of work, where future graduates will be asked to discuss the same topic with a national and international audience.

With regards to the third level in Kirkpatrick's model, namely how skills obtained from the educational plan are used by participants, students showed articulated presentation skills when introduced to the evolutionary/revolutionary model and when applying it to the different international companies used as example in lectures. From a strictly linguistic point of view, students revised grammar topics and learned how to use the different verbal tenses in an appropriate fashion, as well as the specific lexis pertaining to business organizations as illustrated in the following tables:

Table 1 - Business Vocabulary
Organization
Resources (to muster/deploy)
Viable
Exhibit
Profit (to make a; to increase/decrease in)
Costs under control (to keep)
Market control (to gain/lose)
Strategy (to pursue/follow a)
To invest/reinvest
Small/medium enterprise

Table 2 - English Vocabulary
Require attention
According to (Greiner's theory)
In order to (make a profit any organization should...)
Consistent with
Provided that (organizations keep costs under control)
As mentioned previously/before
Rather than
Trying its best (to gain market control)

CONCLUSION

The concluding remarks will discuss the last stage of the evaluation model presented above, namely the profits resulting from the educational action and whether they were in line with the organization's goals and strategies.

The CBI module implemented for the degree in *Gastronomic Sciences* met all the learning goals set out. It, in fact, increased students' use of English as a means of communication. It made learners aware of the importance of interdisciplinary skills for their profession, and it gave them a good amount of confidence in their foreign language skills—especially when compared to their secondary school experience, where interactive practice was not, or was rarely, addressed.

Results from this project are consistent with those reported in other studies: CBI is a successful means of developing foreign language proficiency by exploiting the possibilities offered by content knowledge if true collaboration is put into practice (see among others, Lasagabaster, 2008; Song, 2006; Stryker and Leaver, 1997).

Moreover, we found that students felt a sense of accomplishment because they were studying English through content material focused on topics taken from other curricular majors. This sense of achievement was also reinforced by the presence of both teachers in the team-taught lectures. From a pedagogical point of view, the students learned critical skills such as: how to develop and structure their arguments; how to introduce and explain field-specific concepts; and how to discuss the issues of the field in a well-reasoned way.

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BIODATA

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