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TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND CLIL: a CLIL approach in International Relations University Courses

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Abstract: International relations professionals need cross-cultural competence and English language communication skills to function in the international arena (Graddol 1997). English language communication skills are necessary not only to communicate with foreign colleagues (Bocanegra-Valle 2014) but also to access the vast amount of knowledge transmitted in English over the internet (Ku, Zussman 2010). This work reports the use of CLIL and cross-cultural training in the University of Messina International Relations Advanced Degree Program as a method to raise students' level of English as quickly as possible while giving them the essential intercultural skills for work in the international field. The research-based course program combined cross-cultural communication training (Storti, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Gannon, 2004, Harris and Moran, 2007; U.S Peace Corps Training Handbook 2012,) and intercultural competence skill development (Bennett, 1998). Two objectives were proposed: 1) develop cross-cultural communication competence; 2) bring students up to a B2 level as fast as possible. The final exam demonstrated significant growth in the areas of cross-cultural competence as well as an increase in European Common Framework level ranging from .5 to 1.0 depending on the student. Students expressed their belief that what they had learned would be useful for their future career. Combining CLIL with intercultural competence building seems to be effective in meeting two objectives: increasing English language fluency and developing cross-cultural communication competence. More research is recommended to further document this method for increasing English communication proficiency while developing interculturally competent international professionals.

Key words: CLIL, cross-cultural communication training, intercultural skill development

Cross-cultural competence and the capacity to communicate effectively in the English language are currently considered to be a requirement for a successful international career. Any internationally-focused profession requires the ability to communicate across cultures, work successfully on multicultural teams, solve problems and resolve conflicts.

1. Cross-cultural Competence and English

The following sections discuss the cross-cultural competence and English communication needs of international relations students.

1.1 Cross-cultural competence

International relations students need to begin developing cross-cultural competence in their university years. What is cross-cultural competence? What is intercultural competence? There are many definitions but all of them point to the ability to communicate effectively and achieve something with representatives from other cultures. It is necessary to examine the terms 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural'. This author chooses to utilize research under both titles as having equivalent value for the goal of the course. Many researchers use the terms interchangeably, whereas others define 'cross-cultural' as being more comparative and involves contrasting one's own culture, whereas 'intercultural' deals with the ability of individuals to communicate effectively with other individuals from other cultures. Some would say that 'cross-cultural' comes first and results in 'intercultural'. But whatever one calls it, the goal is the same. The capacity to comprehend, act and react effectively in another culture is one well-rounded definition that has been proposed (Semeski, 2009). International professionals need to acquire cultural knowledge and develop cross-cultural skills, in order to interact effectively with members of other cultures (Zakaria, 2000). The ability to function in cultural contexts very different from the home culture is skill-based. These skills have been identified by many sources. Some of them include language acquisition, conflict resolution, coping with stress and ambiguity, to mention a few (Reid, Semelski, Abbe, et al 2012). Byram (2000) identified five skill areas: attitude, including curiousity; knowledge of how cultures function, including one's own; interpreting and relating skills; discovery and interaction skills with real-life application; critical cultural awareness and political education (Byram, 2009). The ability to

function effectively and creatively on a team is also important for students of international relations.   Bhawuk and Brislin stated that "interculturally competent leaders are needed not only in virtual global teams but also in the multicultural context of regional teams and organizations" (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992).   Intercultural competence is "the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and create appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini, 2003).

The 'complex of abilities' was further defined by Deardoff (2006) "the development of knowledge and skill through experience and training that results in a complex schema of cultural differences, perspective-taking skills, and interpersonal skills, all of which an individual can flexibly (or adaptively) apply through the willingness to engage in new environments even in the face of considerable ambiguity, through self-monitoring and through self –regulation". "It is the ability to step beyond one's own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds" (Castle, Sinicrope, Norris, Watanabe, 2007).   In creating the European Language Framework (ECF), the Council of Europe recognized a significant need for interculturalism in Europe (Council of Europe, 2001).   Great importance was set on "intercultural skills and know-how"; the ability to be a cultural intermediary, to be culturally sensitive and "deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations"; and the capacity to go beyond stereotypes. "Intercultural know-how" was defined as openness towards new experiences, societies, peoples, cultures; the willingness to look at one's own cultural and value system in a relativistic way; the capacity to recognize cultural difference apart from conventional attitudes (ECF part 5).   This course was created with these competences in mind because all of them are important for international relations students.

1.2   English language communication needs

This work presents a course that assists in developing cross-cultural competence in the form of an English CLIL course. It worked on cross-cultural skill development while improving, and in some cases, introducing some sort of proficiency in the English language. It is common knowledge that the English language has become the global 'lingua franca'. The significance of this phenomenon is being studied in various areas, including an ongoing study (VOICE 2013) which has identified and developed an entire corpus of English as an international language (lingua franca). International English now has a new name: ELF "English as a Lingua Franca" (Vienna, 2012). David Graddol (2006) wrote that English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Langage (EFL) are being replaced by English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The meaning of this is very significant for students of international relations: not only will they be speaking English in their jobs, but they will be speaking it with people from many different countries and linguistic backgrounds. Hence, one more reason to acquire both English language capability as well as cross-cultural communication skills.

As early as 1997 David Graddol (Graddol, 1997:8) stated that English covered several major international domains including its role as the working language of international organizations. Other domains include scientific publications, economics, international trade, global advertising, tourism, international safety and security, international law, technology transfer and internet communication. English continues to expand as the lingua franca and there are no indications that this will change for at least fifty years (Graddol, 2004; Nickerson, 2005). Other studies have confirmed that English is the main language of communication in the international arena. (In Nickerson: Akar, 2002, Bilbow 2002). Gupta (2009) clearly identified the ability to use English as one of three elements necessary to access the internet effectively. Even in the academic world professionals

have to be able to communicate with colleagues in other countries and write effectively in English for publications (Bocanegra-Valle, 2014).

The Italian university system is challenged to meet the English communication needs of the students. Basic structural impediments exist: limited number of hours dedicated to English courses, English courses offered only as an elective and not a requirement, scheduling issues that indicate that English is not considered to be very important. Most of them come to the English course with an A1.5 –A2.5 level and are expected to pass an exam on the B2-C1 level, usually after an average of less than 40 hours of instruction, depending on the university degree program. This article pragmatically proposes a way of meeting two needs: English communication capacity and development of cross-cultural competence.

2. The CLIL course

The following sections discuss the formation and implementation of the course.

2.1 Objectives

This CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) course had two objectives: develop cross-cultural competence and bring students up to ECF Level B2 as fast as possible. Frontal lessons emphasized speaking and listening proficiency while reading and writing were the primary goals for the independent projects and assignments may be of two types, depending on length.
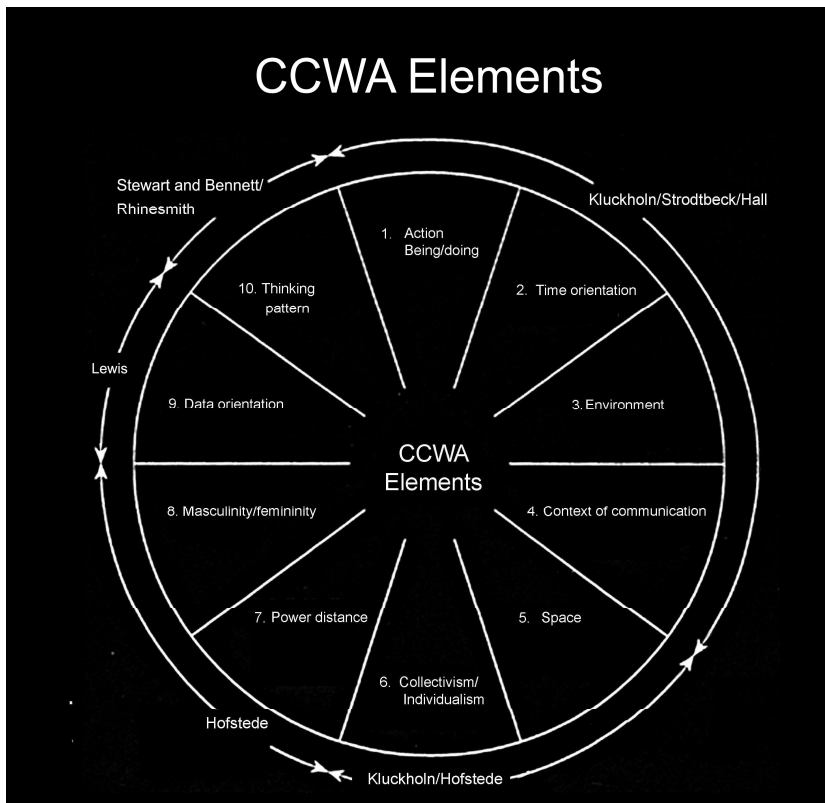
2.2 Methods

The linguistics-based language instruction method was based on Multimodal Analysis (Baldry, Thibault, 2006). Although the actual use of multimodal analysis as a linguistic

analytical tool was quite limited, the students needed to begin with it in order to understand how texts demonstrate meaning in various ways. This gave the students a basic framework in the analysis of texts in order to extract meaning and set the stage for the next part. The course activities were based on multimodal analysis (Baldry, Thibault, 2006) and cross-cultural website analysis (Toffle, 2012). The cross-cultural training method was adapted from various sources including the U.S. Peace Corps Training Manual and other cross-cultural communication research (Storti, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Gannon, 2000; Harris and Moran, 2007) and intercultural competence skill development (Bennett, 1998).

Initial and final ECF English level test and cross-cultural competence test based on the DMIS by Milton Bennett (2003) were administered. The beginning results indicated that most of the students were in the ethnocentric area. (The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993/ Hammer et. al. 2003) is a model that identifies the stages of progression from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism, or rather, the necessary steps for becoming interculturally competent.)

2.3 Activities and Procedure

Students were given the following diagram based on cultural orientations (Toffle, 2013, 2014). Interactive team exercises and cooperative learning assisted them in building their interactive skills and confidence.

CCWA Elements

Stewart and Bennett/ Rhinesmith

Kluckholn/Strodtbeck/Hall

1. Action Being/doing
2. Time orientation
3. Environment
4. Context of communication
5. Space
6. Collectivism/ Individualism
7. Power distance
8. Masculinity/femininity
9. Data orientation
10. Thinking pattern

CCWA Elements

Lewis

Hofstede

Kluckholn/Hofstede

Students studied multimodal analysis based on Halliday's theories (Halliday,1978) and the method developed by Baldry and Thibault (2006) as mentioned above. Students learned to how to analyze a website, recognize its contents and interpret texts. The second part of the course consisted of cross-cultural competence training. They followed the generally accepted proto- type training adapted from the international management field for cross-cultural communication training: 1) raising cultural awareness, 2) developing cultural sensitivity 3) building cross-cultural communication skills. (Storti, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Gannon, 2004; Harris and Moran, 2007; U.S Peace Corps Training Handbook 2012), Various competences cited above were introduced as part of the interactive component of the course.

The final activities of the course focused on examining various websites and texts and applying the model of cultural orientations. Students were forced to think creatively and negotiate solutions together while applying the cultural principles and using English as the communication tool.

2.4   Final evaluation

The students produced a research-based PowerPoint presentation and delivered it in English. They completed the oral and written English exit exams to measure progress and level change. They also completed an exit exam on intercultural competence, based on a different set of questions with the same target.

3.   Results

Using the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method combined with the techniques of multimodal analysis, cross-cultural website analysis and cross-cultural competence training produced results of a 0.5 average increase in level.

An attitudinal change towards different cultures as well as an increasing consciousness of their own cultural values and behaviour was noted through discussion and comments.

Final results showed an improvement of (.5) to almost (1.0) complete ECFR level. Upon administration of an exit test, the intercultural competence level that was initially found to be in the area of ethnocentrism ended in the area of ethno-relativism, mostly in the 'acceptance' zone. (Bennett, 2003). Apart from significant cognitive and linguistic growth, the students demonstrated a new eagerness to learn about new cultures. They also demonstrated the ability to view their own cultures in a more relativistic way and seemed more tolerant of cultural differences.

4.   Conclusions and Recommendations

The strategy of combining CLIL-type instruction, multimodal analysis and cross cultural training seems to be effective when the goal is to raise the ECF level and develop intercultural awareness. The final exam revealed that ECF level improved as well as the score on the intercultural competence scale. Future development should include more

targeted interactivities attached to various identified cross-cultural competencies.   In order to better document the effectiveness of this method for improving English skills the assessment of ECF level should be more thoroughly documented in the areas of reading and writing.

5.   References

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