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IMPLEMENTING CLIL IN PRE-PRIMARY EFL TEACHING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

The European Union places great emphasis on the importance of an early start in learning foreign languages. In 2002, the EU Council established the (perhaps over-) ambitious Barcelona objective, which aimed at introducing "at least two foreign languages from a very early age" (Barcelona European Council, 2002). However, the study of English is not yet compulsory at pre-primary level in Italy (Scuola dell'Infanzia, ages 3-5). Pre-primary education tends to focus on holistic learning and is usually not rigidly structured in terms of curricular content. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) seems to be an ideal approach in this context, since it is inherently holistic: in CLIL, different areas of knowledge and development are integrated in a learning unit within the 4Cs framework (Coyle, 2007), and this could work particularly well in pre-primary education, where there are usually no specific subjects, but, rather, a topic which is approached through different points of view. So far, there have been no structural interventions to implement CLIL in pre-primary education in Italy, and only few academic studies on best practices, methods, and approaches. This paper aims to start filling this gap by discussing the opportunities offered by CLIL in pre-primary education, as well as the possible challenges to be faced by teachers wishing to experiment such an approach, giving some suggestions for successful CLIL implementation with very young learners (VYLs).

Keywords: pre-primary education; CLIL; infant school; pre-primary EFL teaching; very young learners; codeswitching

1 Early language learning and CLIL: the Italian and European context

The European Union places great emphasis on the importance of an early start in learning foreign languages. In 2002, the EU Council established the (perhaps over-) ambitious Barcelona objective, which aimed at introducing "at least two foreign languages from a very early age" (Barcelona European Council, 2002). This led the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) to lower the compulsory starting age for English to the beginning of primary school (age 6, grade 1) in 2004.

The European Commission confirmed its support for early language learning in the following years. For example, the 2004-2006 Action Plan "Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity" highlighted the benefits of fostering a positive attitude towards language learning to promote multilingualism from an early age, stating that "it is a priority for Member States to ensure that language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective, for it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid" (European Commission, 2003, p. 7). In its 2011 policy handbook on "Language Learning at Pre-primary School Level", the European Commission referred to the "critical period" for language learning (Penfield & Roberts, 1959) to further reinforce its argument that an early start is "essential to gain native-speaker levels of competence" (European Commission, 2011, p. 7). While both the notions of "native competence" and of the "critical period" have been challenged by recent research (see Wiley, Bialystok & Hakuta, 2005; Singleton, 2005; Nikolov 2009), some widely acknowledged characteristics of children such as their brain plasticity, their ability to imitate and willingness to learn, as well as the fact that they are usually less anxious and less inhibited than older learners, support the EU argument that early language learning is beneficial (see Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). As Madrid (2001) observed, "those pupils who begin the L2 in the kindergarten or in the first phase of Primary Education normally obtain better results in later stages" (p. 148).

The EU also promotes CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as a methodology that can contribute to its language learning goals by motivating young learners to learn foreign languages, giving them a chance to use language in natural and meaningful situations, in line with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). In particular, in the already-quoted 2011 policy handbook, the European Commission expressed its support for content-based methodologies in early education by stating that "working in pre-primary school settings through the target language can help children reach similar or at least comparable competencies in the first language/ mother tongue and in the target language" (p. 14). However, the section on CLIL in that same document is actually very brief and simply claims that "CLIL is usually applied in primary and secondary education", even though "applications do exist in pre-primary settings, where the approach is adapted to the age group and the curricula" (p. 15). This handbook is "primarily directed at Member State authorities and administrations in charge of early childhood education and care and of language education" (European Commission, 2011, p. 4) and, as such, it does not include specific recommendations or guidelines for teachers, but only some general statements in support of early language learning, affirming, for instance, that:

> Opening children's minds to multilingualism and different cultures is a valuable exercise in itself that enhances individual and social development and increases their capacity to empathise with others. ELL [English Language Learning] activities in pre-primary settings can be an enriching experience and bring considerable benefits.

And

> Starting to learn a second/foreign language early can help shape children's overall progress while they are in a highly dynamic developmental stage in their lives. Starting early also means that learning can take place over a longer period, which may support the achievement of more permanent results in language learning and in other areas of learning. When the young brain learns languages, it tends to develop an enhanced capacity to learn languages throughout life. (European Commission 2011, p. 7)

CLIL is a very popular approach worldwide, and particularly in Europe, where, as we have seen, it has received lots of political support, both at EU and at national levels (see Eurydice, 2012). Yet, most provisions refer to secondary education, and research has been following this trend, focusing mostly on secondary-level learners (as an example, only few of the articles published in the International CLIL Research Journal regard very young learners and pre-primary contexts) and, increasingly, on primary education (for what concerns Italy, see, for instance, Infante, Benvenuto & Lastrucci, 2008; Catenaccio & Giglioni, 2016). Published materials for teachers also seem to predominantly address an older target. In line with this trend, the 2003 Reform of Italy's second cycle of education, implemented by Ministerial Decrees 87, 88, and 89 in 2010, made CLIL compulsory in most upper secondary schools ("licei" and "istituti tecnici"); this provision was finally implemented in school year 2014/2015 (MIUR, 2014; see Cinganotto, 2016). However, twenty years after the establishment of the "mother-tongue-plus-two" Barcelona objective, the study of English (and/or of other foreign languages), either through CLIL or any other methodology, has not yet been enforced in pre-primary education in Italy ("Scuola dell'infanzia," ages 3-5)[1], where the curriculum does not include any compulsory provisions for the teaching of English. The latest National Guidelines (2012) recognise that pre-school children should be introduced to the "sounds, tones and different meanings" of other languages, but so far, there have been no structural interventions to implement English teaching in pre-primary education in Italy. Although many infant schools have established some form of English teaching among their activities[2], it is still left to the goodwill and skills of individual teachers or, occasionally, of groups of teachers, educators, or academics who decide to set up a project.

Since CLIL can be an engaging and authentic way of learning English, especially for very young learners, scholars and teachers have called for more research on best practices, methods,

1 Since the world's education systems vary widely in terms of both structure and content, in this paper I will refer to what in Italy is called "Scuola dell'infanzia" (ages 3-5) either as "infant school" or, following the terminology used by the International Standard Classification of Education, as "pre-primary education". ISCED 2011 divides early childhood education into two categories: "early childhood educational development and preprimary education. The former has educational content designed for younger children (in the age range of 0 to 2 years), whilst the latter is designed for children from age 3 years to the start of primary education" (ISCED 2011, p. 26).

2 According to a large-scale 2014 survey by the Italian Ministry of Education, quoted by Mair (2018, p. 23), 84.8% of Italian pre-schools had already activated some form of L2 teaching or "awareness of other languages" programmes (Langé & Lopriore, 2014).

and approaches for pre-primary CLIL, which unfortunately is still scarce (see Murphy, 2014, pp. 116-119). As noted by Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou from the PROCLIL team[3], "there is a great disparity between CLIL literature available for primary and pre-primary educational levels and CLIL literature for secondary or tertiary levels" (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2011, p. 4). This paper aims to start filling this gap by reviewing existing studies and discussing the opportunities offered by CLIL in pre-primary education, as well as the possible challenges to be faced by teachers wishing to experiment with such an approach, giving some suggestions for successful CLIL implementation with very young learners (VYLs).

As Costa et al. (2018) observed, "MIUR has proposed CLIL as an appropriate approach for the pre-school, yet there are few guidelines available as to how L2 projects should be implemented at this level" (p. 12). In 2014, the then-Minister of Education Stefania Giannini mentioned CLIL in her planning guidelines, envisaging "a primary school, or even an infant school, where children can learn a foreign language (English) though CLIL" (Linee Programmatiche, 2014, p. 14. My translation). However, CLIL has remained statutory only in upper secondary education and no official national training schemes on pre-primary CLIL have been set up until very recently, with some notable exceptions at local or regional level, such as the project described by Costa et al. (2018), who also point to the existence of other projects, which are unfortunately "largely undocumented in research" (p. 12). In 2012, MIUR established the competences required to become a qualified secondary CLIL teacher. The profile defined by MIUR was developed thanks to the work of different groups coordinated by Gisella Langé (see Marsh & Langé, 2000; Cinganotto, 2016) and it includes competences in three areas: language (C1), subject and teaching. CLIL training courses addressed to in-service subject teachers ("corsi di perfezionamento") are offered by Italian universities since 2013; in 2016, the National Teacher Training Plan recognised CLIL training as a priority (see Serragiotto, 2017). However, only very recently, in June 2022, the Ministry of Education has finally opened these official "corsi di perfezionamento" (academic professional development courses organised by universities and awarding ECTS credit-points), previously reserved to secondary teachers, to primary and pre-primary teachers as well (Decreto Dipartimentale 1511, June 23, 2022). This will hopefully increase the resources available for pre-primary CLIL and thus its implementation, which requires specific pre-service and in-service teacher training.

2 Pre-primary CLIL: an introduction

The term CLIL was coined by David Marsh in 1994 and it has since been used as "an umbrella term" to refer to situations in which a subject is "taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language" (Marsh, 2002, p. 58). Marsh also highlighted the importance of early plurilingualism, and how CLIL can represent an important contribution towards the EU "mother-tongue-plus-two" goal:

3 The PROCLIL programme (2006-2009) is a project co-funded by the European Commission (Comenius fund) and aimed at investigating various CLIL implementation models for Primary and Preprimary education. The partners involved were the University of Cyprus (coordinator), the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, Weingarten University of Education in Germany, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid in Spain, Cukurova University in Turkey and Bristol University in the UK. (See Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2011)

> We know that there are social, economic, cultural and ecological advantages to be gained through promoting plurilingualism through language learning right across our societies. CLIL offers one additional means by which to give our youngsters the opportunities to develop their capacity to use language and to reap benefits in their present and future lives. (Marsh & Langé, 2000, p. 10)

In the literature, CLIL has been defined in many different ways, varying from views of CLIL as an educational approach, a method, or even a programme, and from full immersion programmes to single content-based activities proposed in the language classroom. CLIL can thus refer to a wide range of scenarios. Most experts agree that 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, Hood & Marsh, 2010, p. 1). According to this view, CLIL is a flexible and varied approach that may include different methods and applications, and, as such, it can be implemented in many different curriculum models and adapted to different age-groups, levels, and contexts, allowing for both low- and high-intensity exposure. However, a series of key principles have been identified to distinguish CLIL from other practices. Gabillon (2020) summed them up as follows: "CLIL aims to (a) respect plurilingual teaching philosophies, (b) consider language, content, communication, context and cognition as an inseparable unified entity, (c) create naturalistic learning environments, (d) provide tasks that promote cognitive engagement and creativity, (e) allow collaborative knowledge building, (f) promote dialogical interaction, and, (g) develop awareness of self and others" (Gabillon, 2020, p. 116).

One of the tenets of CLIL is the 4C-framework elaborated by Coyle (2007) and congruently mentioned in point (b) above: content, cognition, communication, and culture. These four Cs seem to be particularly suited to the context of pre-primary education, where most approaches are inherently CLIL-like, in that they tend to focus on cognitive engagement, collaborative learning, and self- and other- awareness. Particularly for very young learners, language acquisition is closely related to the 4Cs: as is well known, children learn a foreign language more easily if they acquire it spontaneously, in a realistic and natural context, similar to the situation in which they acquired their first language, that is, while performing other cognitively challenging activities. This is precisely what happens with CLIL, which does not only integrate content and language, but also focuses on the development of other skills and competences, so that "children learn to use the language, and use language to learn" at the same time (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 26; Marsh & Langé, 2000).

CLIL has proven to be more effective than traditional EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes particularly for what concerns receptive skills, vocabulary, morphology, creativity, fluency, and affective outcomes (Dalton-Puffer, 2008), as well as oral production (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). CLIL can favour the development of self-regulation skills and improve attention, autonomy, and metacognition, as it promotes "learning that is cognitively meaningful and strongly contextualised" (Costa et al., 2018, p. 7). This is quite similar to what happens in other, more "traditional", communicative-based approaches to EFL teaching at pre-primary level, and such similarity may actually be one of the reasons why very few studies have tried to develop a specific CLIL methodology for very young learners. As Marsh (2012) noted, "early language learning, whether at kindergarten, pre-school or primary, inevitably involve[s] forms of CLIL" (p. 133). Similarly, Coyle, Hood, & Marsh (2010) observed that "it is often hard to distinguish

CLIL from standard forms of good practice in early language learning", because the main focus with very young learners is always "on the doing – be it playing, singing, drawing, building models, or other activities" (p. 17). The benefits of CLIL in pre-primary education are thus not limited to the improvement of language skills and content knowledge: they also and foremost include the promotion of a comprehensive form of learning, focused on the development of the child as a person.

Pre-primary education is characterised by a holistic approach and is usually not rigidly structured in terms of curricular content, but rather aims "to support children's early cognitive, physical, social and emotional development" as a whole (ISCED 2011, p. 26). CLIL seems to be an ideal approach in this context, since its inherently holistic perspective suits the way children learn naturally and is thus consistent with the teaching style encouraged by early childhood pedagogy (see Coyle, 2007): in CLIL, different areas of knowledge and development are integrated within a single learning unit, and this works particularly well in pre-primary education, where there are usually no specific subjects in the day-to-day routine, but rather a topic which is introduced and approached through different points of view (social, emotional, physical, linguistic, cognitive, artistic…).

The main difference between a CLIL approach and standard EFL teaching at pre-primary level is that in pre-primary CLIL the cognitive aspects comes before content and language, both in planning and in implementation, so that English becomes a vehicle to develop new competences in different areas and to carry out some of the activities that would normally be done in L1. That is, pre-primary CLIL is "not just about learning an L2 'label' for a pre-existing concept, but acquiring previously unknown (or partly unknown) knowledge" about a topic, and, at the same time, "the correct linguistic means of articulating this new knowledge" (Mair, 2018, p. 31). This approach favours an integration of CLIL within the daily activities and routines of the classroom, thereby creating an ideal space to introduce English naturally, using the existing (properly trained) staff and without the need for specialised teachers, as documented by Mair (2018, p. 28).

According to Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2008), in CLIL "thinking drives the teaching/learning process" (p. 30): while content and language are the explicit goals of CLIL, cognitive skills are the starting and ending point of the learning process, because they are what enables very young learners to use the acquired knowledge and skills appropriately. Through CLIL, children learn by "perceiving, recognizing, judging, reasoning, conceiving and imagining" (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 30) and, paradoxically, "more language is learnt when the focus on direct language teaching is reduced and the content teaching is increased" (Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols, 2008, p. 32). This is because, as we have seen, children tend to learn foreign languages in the same way as they learnt their first language, that is, by focusing more on content and cognition than on language accuracy: as Marsh stated, "one reason why very young children seem so good at picking up language is often to do with the naturalness of the environment around them" (Marsh & Langé, 2000, p. 3). Similarly, Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) noted that "children adapt well to learning languages if it is integrated into other types of learning and carried out in a 'naturalistic' environment" (p. 11). Such integrated forms of learning and the "naturalness" of the situation are among the main tenets of CLIL, which "offers opportunities to allow youngsters to use another language naturally, in such a way that they soon forget about the language and only focus on the learning topic" (Marsh, 2000, p. 6).

In line with the cognitive and psycho-evolutionary characteristics of very young learners, the already-mentioned flexible curriculum of pre-primary education allows for CLIL contents to be organised into global interdisciplinary areas, focusing on cross-curricular topics in an integrated way, rather than on a single disciplinary area, as is usually done in primary and secondary education. Because of this flexibility, in pre-primary CLIL there are no limitations regarding the choice of topics, which can also be negotiated with children themselves, based on their interests and preferences. The insights that children derive from CLIL can positively affect their holistic development, including their understanding of the outside world, so that CLIL can become a "lived-through" experience (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010, p. 64), also thanks to the fact that pre-primary education is generally "less abstract and more experiential and student-centred" (Costa et al. 2018, p. 7). In Italy, the curricular areas for infant school are defined by "Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione" (MIUR, 2012) and include five so-called "campi d'esperienza" ("experiential areas"), covering linguistic, cognitive, psychomotor and social skills: self and other; body and movement; images, sounds and colours; speech and words; and knowledge of the world. CLIL can very easily be integrated within these five "experiential areas", which can also help teachers identify suitable topics that will favour not only language and content learning, but also cognitive and cultural development.

Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2008, pp. 13-18) have identified two main formats for CLIL implementation with young learners: "language showers" and "total early immersion". While the latter seems less appropriate for the average infant school, because it involves carrying out the daily curricular activities exclusively in the foreign language, I think the first format would perfectly suit the Italian pre-primary curriculum. "Language showers" are short daily lessons aimed at introducing the foreign language through "games, songs, many visuals, realia, handling of objects and movement" (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 13), focusing on repetition and routine activities. The main goal of this approach is to make children aware of the existence of different languages and to prepare them for future language learning by creating "positive attitudes [and] familiarity with the sounds and structures" (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 13). These goals are also part of the Italian National guidelines for infant school.

The implementation of pre-primary CLIL presents a series of challenges which do not only concern the appropriate integration of the 4Cs and the definition of suitable goals, but also language pedagogy and teachers' competences in general. Specific teacher training is fundamental for the development of pre-primary CLIL projects, as is collaboration among the different stakeholders, including teachers, parents and policy makers. First of all, CLIL implies "significant changes in the way in which teaching is planned, sequenced and carried out" (Pavón Vázquez & Rubio Alcalá, 2010, p. 45) and, due to the lack of adequate materials, it also requires time-consuming preparation and planning, both to develop materials and to devise activities that are adequate to the age, language level and developmental stage of very young learners, in order to meet language and content goals, while at the same time contributing to the development of cognitive skills. For these reasons, "it may be wiser to begin with small-scale implementations, in which challenges can be identified and addressed with more agility, which can then be grown into larger implementations as additional resources may allow" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 146).

On the other hand, given the flexibility of the pre-primary curriculum, it is relatively easy to identify suitable interdisciplinary topics and to find the time to carry out the activities in infant school, which is not constrained by the more rigid curriculum structure and syllabi of primary and secondary schools. Even the scarcity of ready-to-use materials and lesson plans for pre-primary CLIL may actually be seen as an advantage, since it represents an opportunity for teachers to get creative and make original materials together with the children or adapt already-existing multimedia and multimodal materials for EFL teaching (including songs, rhymes, stories, games, and videos) to make them more "CLIL-like". CLIL also allows pre-primary teachers to apply different methodologies that have already proven successful with very young learners, drawing inspiration from varied approaches such as TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching), TPR (Total Physical Response) and storytelling. All these approaches prioritize "the use of real materials surrounding the child, looking for motivation for learning other languages, describing the teacher as a facilitator of learning, and targeting at the simultaneous acquisition of L1 and L2 in a relaxing and motivating atmosphere" (Pino & Rodríguez, 2006, p. 153, as translated in Andúgar & Cortina-Pérez, 2018, p. 226).

One of the crucial factors in learning languages is motivation (see Cook & Singleton, 2014; Gardner, 2007), which for very young learners usually coincides with self-satisfaction and enjoyment because, as Vygotskij (1978) stated, "the child moves forward through play" (p. 103). Since children learn by playing, touching, manipulating, exploring, and experiencing, pre-primary teachers should ensure that CLIL activities are challenging and fun, and mainly focused on sensorimotor learning, repetition, and imitation: by stimulating children's senses, teachers can encourage language learning and increase motivation (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 142). Many studies on pre-primary EFL teaching suggest focusing on oral skills and communicative activities, devising dynamic and playful tasks also involving fine and gross motor skills, movement, rhythm, and even silence, within a multimodal approach that includes visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic activities, so as to provide for different learning styles (see, for instance, Rodríguez, 2004; Fleta, 2014; Ioannou-Georgiou, 2011). For the same reasons, multimodal input, including visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic channels, is fundamental in pre-primary CLIL. To keep motivation and involvement high, teachers should also consider children's limited attention span, ensuring that activities are not only fun, but also short, ideally no longer than 10-15 minutes. It is also important not to insist too much on production: very young learners cannot be expected to say much in English, and they will usually be able to understand much more than they can say. In any case, they should be encouraged to use full sentences, or at least phrases, rather than words in isolation.

According to Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2008), the successful implementation of CLIL at any level requires some essential elements: "multiple focus, safe and enriching learning environment, authenticity, active learning, scaffolding and cooperation" (p. 29). The "multiple focus" may be seen an evolution of the "dual-focussed" approach mentioned in many definitions of CLIL: communication, content, cognition and culture goals should be developed by integrating different subjects and cross-curricular topics. This is particularly significant at pre-primary level, where the main goal is the holistic development of the child. A "safe and enriching environment" is also very important for very young learners: a caring and supporting place, where everyone is valued, increases children's confidence and favours their active participation, which is vital for a positive CLIL experience. For example, repetition and routines are particularly appreciated by children, and they can contribute to improving self-esteem and

motivation by making children feel safe, allowing them to predict what is coming next. Another suggestion for the creation of a safe and enriching environment in pre-primary contexts is the use of visuals as a scaffolding strategy that "helps students feel emotionally secure" (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 139): thanks to the visual support provided by pictures, drawings and other materials displayed throughout the room, children will become more confident and more motivated to participate actively. This leads us to the concepts of "active learning" and "cooperation": differently from traditional methods, in CLIL, learners, even very young ones, are active elements in the teaching and learning process; they are encouraged to support each other and work cooperatively. Additionally, cooperation is crucial in CLIL also for teachers, as teamwork is fundamental for successful CLIL planning and implementation: the whole school community, including families, should be aware of the importance of CLIL. Finally, the "authenticity" element of CLIL is related to the already-mentioned natural use of language. The use of CLIL to teach EFL at pre-primary level favours incidental learning, which, as we have seen, is precisely the way in which children learn their L1: during CLIL activities, children tend to give peripheral attention to language, as they are focused on the content and on the activities themselves, just like they would do in an L1 learning environment. CLIL thus extends incidental learning from the acquisition of L1 to that of a foreign language, creating situations in which children *use* language instead of consciously learning it. As Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) stated, "CLIL can offer learners of any age a natural situation for language development which builds on forms of learning. This natural use of language can boost a learner's motivation towards, and hunger for, learning languages" (p. 12). As is well known, motivation is vital in language learning, but while adults may want to learn English for practical reasons, children do not usually see the practical value of learning a foreign language. Therefore, their self-motivation should come from somewhere else: a CLIL approach based on real materials and contents connected to their everyday life can exploit children's curiosity and their need to explore, communicate, and interact to foster their motivation to learn English, making language learning relevant for them.

3 Models and guidelines for pre-primary CLIL implementation

Despite the scarcity of structured models and materials for the implementation of CLIL at pre-primary level, various scholars have developed projects and guidelines that may help teachers and educators wishing to experiment a CLIL approach with very young learners (see Serragiotto, 2012). One of the most notable CLIL projects at pre-primary level in Italy was carried out by a team of researchers from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan) in a group of "scuole paritarie" (state-recognised private schools) ranging from pre-primary to lower secondary. The project is described in Costa et al. (2018), with a specific focus on pre-primary education in the chapter by Olivia Mair, "Four seasons of CLIL at two Italian preschools" (Mair, 2018).

The first year of the project involved 21 generalist and EFL teachers who took part in 70 hours of training, followed by implementation, observation and surveys. Teacher training included both language competence and methodology: the language course focused mostly on communicative competence and oral skills, while the methodological part took as its guiding principle Coyle's 4Cs framework. Given the lack of appropriate resources for pre-primary CLIL, teachers were also trained in developing materials and creating lesson plans including both

content and language goals. The final phases included the recording of a sample CLIL lesson by each teacher, and the evaluation of the project.

The schools involved in the project felt the need to improve their course offerings through native language assistants (NLAs) at all school levels, including pre-school. However, the researchers observed how, particularly with very young learners, the affective ties between teachers and learners are fundamental for the successful implementation of CLIL, so the participation of the class teacher(s) in CLIL projects is crucial. In spite of some difficulties that emerged during the project (such as teachers' lack of fluency and spontaneity, and the time-consuming material preparation), the study's findings revealed that CLIL is indeed a suitable approach in pre-primary education and confirmed the advantages of training pre-primary teachers for CLIL rather than hiring specialised L2 teachers (Mair, 2018; Costa et al., 2018).

The pre-primary teachers chose the four seasons as their topic: this is a very common topic in infant school and offers many opportunities to develop age-appropriate activities including all five "experiential areas", also through storytelling, which favours the creation of a natural L2 environment in which communication is more spontaneous. The activities used in the module included playing, listening to music, singing, TPR, drawing and working with objects and real materials.

One of the challenges teachers had to face was how to evaluate whether the content and linguistic goals had been met. In fact, to make sure children have understood the concept, it is not enough to observe if they can mimic the sound, but they should also be asked, for example, to match the sound to the object. Therefore, teachers had to devise a series of cognitively challenging games that required classification and sorting, such as pairing colours and seasons, or, for older children, seasons and fruits. Another issue that emerged during the project was that teachers sometimes struggled with pronunciation, intonation and fluency, as well as with lexis and syntax. This inevitably limited their spontaneity. Nonetheless, all the teachers were able to successfully interact with children and reformulate their L1 answers in English, and most children were motivated and engaged. One teacher with a higher English level demonstrated greater confidence and spontaneity, and this seemed to positively affect her teaching style, with stronger interaction, better reformulation, correct language modelling, reinforcement of key concepts and vocabulary, and a more playful and child-centred approach (Mair, 2018, pp. 33-36). This demonstrates the importance of combining CLIL training with appropriate language training, even for pre-primary teachers: in fact, it is not always easy to find regular pre-school teachers whose English level is high enough for them to be able to participate in a CLIL project, but "teachers who do have a satisfactory language level can achieve excellent results" (Mair, 2018, p. 45). In particular, the study revealed that properly training classroom teachers, and/or ensuring a close collaboration between class teachers and NLAs, is better than hiring specialised L2 teachers, not only because the former have specific pedagogical competences, but also because of the importance of the affective variables for very young learners:

> The value of having permanent classroom teachers involved in L2 teaching in an early years learning environment should not be underestimated due to the affective bonds already established between child and teacher. Unlike a visiting L2 teacher who meets the children once a week and may not have early years pedagogical

> training, classroom teachers are familiar with the needs and abilities of each child and understand how to plan age-appropriate activities and engage children's interest. The presence of regular teachers helps to ensure that the L2 is part of a natural learning environment and overall it enables English to be integrated into the preschool day to a much greater extent. (Mair, 2018, p. 37)

As highlighted in several studies as well as policy documents (see, for instance, the ELLiE report by Enever et al., 2011), having qualified CLIL teachers is fundamental at all levels. Therefore, for the successful implementation of CLIL at pre-primary level it is vital to invest, both economically and in terms of research, on teacher education and continuing professional development. For pre-primary CLIL teachers, four key areas of expertise can be identified: specific pedagogical competences for very young learners, so as to be able to plan activities, prepare materials and use teaching strategies that favour children's participation, regardless of their (probably limited) L2 linguistic repertoire; advanced linguistic-communicative competences in English, so as to be able to manage effective classroom interaction, support the development of the cognitive and communicative skills of children, and provide good language modelling, particularly for what concerns pronunciation and intonation; flexibility and excellent teamwork skills, to guarantee inter-area collaboration and an inclination to discuss, plan and teach with colleagues; a self-reflective approach and the willingness to be involved in professional development and innovation (see Escobar Urmeneta, 2010, pp. 196-197).

Another interesting study on primary and pre-primary CLIL has been carried out by the already-mentioned PROCLIL team and described by Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2011). The PROCLIL model draws its pedagogical approach from communicative language teaching (CLT), Coyle's 4Cs framework and BICS/CALP theories, and it is based on three key points:

1) Effective learning of the required subject matter (the content in CLIL) through a foreign language (in this case English), where:
   a) there is no substantive difference between core learning achievements in the CLIL classroom and the expected achievements in the L1 classroom, and
   b) the curriculum (as set by the school or education authority) guides the teacher and the instructional plan
2) CLIL involves focussed and structured attention to language (in this case, English) in the curriculum. This involves:
   a) active support for foreign language learning in subject lessons […]
   b) where there are no separate English language classes, attention to the language knowledge, skills and learning strategies to support the more subject oriented activity in a) above.
3) CLIL involves a focus on the pupil, reflected in the organisation and implementation of CLIL within schools and schooling systems. […] (Kiely 2011a, pp. 30-31)

In this model, particular attention is devoted to scaffolding techniques, including verbal, content and learning process scaffolding (Massler et al., 2011, p. 67): pre-primary CLIL teachers should be able to use different scaffolding strategies and to adapt them to the age and cognitive level of children. For example, input can be made comprehensible for very young learners not only by using simple, repetitive language, and by exaggerating intonation, but

also through gestures, facial expressions, and miming. Other visualisation techniques such as pictures, models, and videos, as well as hands-on experiences such as dancing, acting out, gluing, and cutting may also facilitate children's understanding of both the language and the content, as well as the development of other skills, such as cognitive and fine-motor skills.

In addition to using visuals, gestures, and repetition to facilitate understanding and participation, another scaffolding strategy that may be used with very young learners is codeswitching, that is, the alternation between English and L1, either by children, for example in group work or discussions, and/or by the teacher, for example to clarify instructions, provide relevant vocabulary or model back what children say in L1. However, it should always be kept in mind that the younger the children, the more important it is to avoid lengthy verbal explanations, favouring the active discovery of concepts through experimentation and practical activities. For example, if children need support in understanding what they are expected to do during a practical activity, instead of repeating the instructions in L1, the teacher could provide a model of the activity to be carried out, doing it herself while describing (in English) what she is doing, so as to offer two forms of scaffolding at once (see Massler et al., 2011). The combination of these different scaffolding strategies can help children understand the activities, ensure that nobody is left behind, and increase participation and motivation.

The issue of codeswitching is a controversial one, as EFL teaching has traditionally been dominated by language separation ideologies based on monolingualism, i.e., the "English-only" policy, and there is still a widespread monolingual orientation according to which the L1 should never be used in the foreign language classroom (see Inbar-Lourie, 2010). This approach is "usually justified in terms of maximising learners' exposure to the language" (Cameron, 2001, p. 199), but it fails to consider other issues such as the fact that there is no linear relationship between exposure to language and learning (listening to a language is not enough to learn it!), and that the use of English-only goes against the natural forces of communication between people and risks becoming very unnatural, especially with young learners, and when teacher and class share a common language (Cameron, 2001, p. 200).

There is also growing research suggesting that judicious use of classroom codeswitching might be beneficial to FL learning for young and very young learners (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014; Song & Lee, 2019). In particular, Song and Lee (2019) examined the effects of teacher codeswitching on the vocabulary learning of EFL preschoolers in South Korea, and their results accorded with those of previous studies on older children, such as Macaro and Lee (2013), revealing a greater effectiveness of codeswitching compared to English-only instruction also for very young learners. Therefore, EFL teaching is gradually evolving towards a form of bilingual education within the context of translanguaging pedagogies (see, for instance, García & Li, 2014; Turnbull, 2018; Rabbidge, 2019), and research on the role of multiple language resources in CLIL classrooms is finally starting to gain momentum (see Lin & He, 2017; Coyle, 2018).

For an appropriate use of codeswitching, teachers should be familiar with the theoretical framework of translanguaging, which requires us to interpret the CLIL acronym as "content and languages integrated learning", highlighting the need to focus on all of the learners' languages, including their L1, rather than on English only (see Lisaitė & Smits, 2022). As Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2011) noted, "the CLIL classroom is a classroom of two languages,

L1 and L2. The challenge for the teacher is managing the roles these play" (p. 55). In fact, a translanguaging approach does not simply involve the mixing of two different isolated monoglossic systems (as in codeswitching), but it includes different kinds of multilingual practices and implies a holistic approach to language learning, based on the concept of multicompetence and on a softening of the boundaries between languages, whereby both teachers and learners flexibly draw on their integrated linguistic repertoire to communicate (see Cenoz & Gorter 2011; 2015; 2022). Translanguaging can thus play a key role as a scaffolding strategy in pre-primary CLIL, for example by supporting effective classroom management, offering positive encouragement, and helping create a welcoming environment.

Since a supportive, motivating, and relaxed environment is important for language learning, especially with young children, the teacher should clarify the "translanguaging policy" from the very beginning: for example, children could be reassured that they are free to use their mother tongue in some occasions (such as when they are working in groups), and that they can ask for clarification whenever they are confused. Initially, the teacher may frequently codeswitch between English and L1: while this inevitably reduces children's exposure to English, it also boosts their confidence and ensures a gradual and stress-free introduction to the foreign language. Cameron suggests following the principle of "deliberate language choice", moving away from the English-only policy to "use as much of the target language as possible, and ensure that use of first language supports the children's language learning" (Cameron, 2001, p. 199). For example, teachers may use L1 to explain new vocabulary, give instructions, check understanding of a concept or a word, give feedback, discipline, or for informal talk with children. However, choosing how much and when to switch from English to L1 is a matter of contingency, that is, it is related to the specific context and situation, and it is thus very difficult to provide guidelines on this. Pennington (1995) distinguished between compensatory and strategic uses of codeswitching: compensatory uses of L1 are based on perceived problems with understanding or motivation (including teacher-related factors such as lack of confidence), while strategic uses are mostly related to structuring lessons. Cameron suggests an alternative interpretation of the patterns guiding codeswitching in the classroom, based on a "dynamic view" of language choice, which includes many factors, including interpersonal ones (Cameron, 2001, p. 205). This view seems closer to a translanguaging approach, which sees L1 and L2 as expressions of one single linguistic repertoire, from which learners can freely draw to communicate, rather than as separate systems.

The exposure to English should gradually increase as children's skills and confidence improve; however, the L1 should always play a part in pre-primary CLIL, in line with translanguaging theories and the view of CLIL as bilingual/multilingual education, as suggested by the PROCLIL model, which also recommends establishing clear rules to set some boundaries to the use of L1. Ioannou-Georgiou (2011, p. 46) highlights the importance of "creating an L2 environment" by using English for basic classroom interaction such as greetings and instructions ("sit down", "close the door", etc...), and by creating routines such as starting with a song, a game, or a daily weather or feelings chart. Children should be encouraged, but not forced, to use English more and more as they become more confident; however, teachers should keep in mind that in pre-primary education the focus is on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, rather than solely on the achievement of specific language and content goals: the pedagogical advantage of CLIL is precisely the integration of all these aspects within a single and inclusive project. Children should thus be offered

multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement[4] to show their understanding and involvement on all levels, through different auditory, visual and kinaesthetic activities such as play, Total Physical Response (TPR), miming, listening, matching, drawing, and colouring. These techniques ensure that all children can find a way to participate actively, even if they are not yet able to express themselves in English, and regardless of their favourite learning style.

Richard Kiely has put forward some principles to guide codeswitching in the CLIL classroom:

a) Maximise exposure to and use of L2 in the CLIL classroom. [...]
b) Manage the classroom in English. [...]
c) Focus on accuracy in pronunciation. [...]
d) Check comprehension using L1. [...]
e) Teach L1 terms for subject. [...] It is important for three reasons that in the CLIL classroom there are opportunities to develop L1 subject language. First, children may need to continue the subject in L1, and should not be lacking in subject competence compared to pupils from non-CLIL classrooms. Second, this knowledge enables children to talk to their parents or carers about school at the end of the day. [...] Third, children in CLIL classrooms have different backgrounds and needs, and vocabulary familiar to some may not be familiar to all. [...]
f) Promote interlingual work – exploring the two languages. A defining characteristic of CLIL is exploration of subject content in two languages. This provides a context for exploring the linguistic features – similarities, differences, parallels and patterns – which define each language. [...] Such work may conflict with a language-focussed view which only values attention to L2, but it is wholly in line with a more holistic educational perspective which sees potential for learning in exploring linguistic concepts by explicitly comparing two languages.
g) Use L1 to support learning. In the CLIL classroom, L1 is a resource which the teacher and pupils can draw on to develop understanding of subject content. It can combine with other essential resources such as visual representation (pictures, diagrams, graphs, etc) and gestures to ensure that children who find the L2 talk challenging do not fall behind. (Kiely 2011b, pp. 63-64)

These principles can provide some guidance to teachers in the difficult task of finding a balance between L1 and L2 use in pre-primary CLIL. If, on the one hand, limiting the use of L1 increases exposure to English and may be more effective in terms of language outcomes, on the other hand, it can also reduce the understanding of the content, as well as active participation and motivation. Teachers should thus use codeswitching within a wider translanguaging perspective, consciously and purposefully, trying to find their own balance between the two (or more) languages involved in CLIL, and keeping in mind that L1 and L2 are not two separate systems but part of a single linguistic repertoire from which both learners and teachers can draw freely: when the content is easily accessible to children, for example thanks to the use of visuals or other scaffolding strategies, as well as during basic classroom

4 These three aspects are inspired by the principles of UDL (Universal Design for Learning), "a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people" and "to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST 2018).

interaction, routines and instructions, the use of English can be maximized to focus on the language goals; instead, when the content is cognitively challenging, or children's motivation and/or participation seem to be decreasing, the teacher may use, or invite children to use, their mother tongue.

4 Conclusion

The studies carried out by Università Cattolica and by the PROCLIL team are two excellent examples of how CLIL can be successfully implemented with very young learners. Starting from their findings, as well as from other theoretical studies, I have put forward some suggestions for pre-primary teachers and prospective teachers wishing to get involved in CLIL projects and training. In particular, I have highlighted the opportunities and challenges presented by pre-primary CLIL and the importance of integrating it within the holistic perspective of the pre-primary curriculum, focusing on the cognitive development of children and on their needs and interests, using codeswitching purposefully within a translanguaging perspective, and paying attention to the different learning styles and attitudes of children. Further research and in-class experimentation is needed to define specific implementation models, identify possible problems in practice, and develop appropriate teaching materials for pre-primary CLIL, as well as to set up adequate training programmes specifically aimed at pre-primary teachers, but I hope this paper has started to lay down some theoretical and practical foundations on which to build such models and programmes: despite the challenges, CLIL is definitely a promising approach in infant education, worthy of further theoretical study and methodological development.

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