Chapter 6

I Search Therefore I Learn – Active and Collaborative Learning in Language Teaching: Two Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

In Content and Language Integrated Learning the context is to explicitly teach a subject through a foreign or second language, and therefore, implicitly to teach the language through this subject. Adding the activity of collaborative search is part of constructing the context, and hence making language learning real. With these goals in mind, collaborative and active learning is supported by the LearnWeb2.0 infrastructure, which helps students in collaborative searching and organization of resources. In LearnWeb2.0, searching is focused on a specific subject providing materials from Web 2.0 platforms; ratings and comments are directly linked to the resources and shared within the learning group. The authors present two CLIL courses, one in Germany and one in Italy, for which LearnWeb2.0 was used. For both courses, the authors present the tasks they designed to foster students’ active and creative learning, and discuss how these tasks were supported by our infrastructure. They present the evaluation design and results for both courses. Based on this, they discuss commonalities and differences in both scenarios, from the educational and cultural point of view, and how these influence students’ performance and satisfaction. Finally, the authors discuss lessons learned and ideas for improving educational setup and functionalities for future LearnWeb2.0 based courses.

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INTRODUCTION

“CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh, 2002).

In the last 10 years, CLIL has been considered to be one of the most promising approaches to foreign language learning. The European Commission website on language learning (http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/language-teaching/doc236_en.htm) stresses the benefits of CLIL when building intercultural knowledge and understanding developing communication skills, improving language competences and oral communication skills, developing multilingual interests and attitudes, providing opportunities to study content through different perspectives, diversifying classroom methodology, and increasing learners’ motivation and confidence in both the language and the subject being taught.

The promise of integrating both content and language learning is very challenging, and to be successful, good resources, a clearly defined set of objectives, and good task design are essential. Most importantly, CLIL teachers cannot simply ‘transmit’ the content, assuming that their students understand. Rather, CLIL requires an adjustment in methodology to ensure that students understand the content (whether conceptual or procedural), and teachers have to think of other means (group work, tasks) which actively involve the students and give the teacher additional possibilities for feedback, regarding the language as well as the content being taught. Educational materials have to focus clearly on the role that language plays in the students’ assimilation of concepts.

Current research in the field focuses mainly on the structural and lexical aspects of language (Coyle, 2006; Swain, 1993). In our work we deal with the content and collaboration aspects relevant for successful CLIL material design, by presenting a descriptive analysis of two case studies. From the pedagogical point of view, we adopt a real life and explorative learning approach where students within the project work collaboratively, collect and design materials for CLIL. From the standpoint of computer science we support searching for an organization of relevant multimedia objects.

In this context we address the following research questions: (1) What pedagogical and project design should be used to support CLIL teaching at universities and to foster student reflection on methods and materials appropriate for CLIL? (2) How can a platform for collaborative work and collaborative searching be appropriately used and adapted in different university contexts, so that it helps in the process of learning how to teach English in a CLIL context and learning how to improve English as a foreign language?

For both the Hannover and Pavia course, we present the tasks we designed to foster students’ active and creative learning, and we discuss how these tasks were supported by our infrastructure. We present our evaluation design and results for both courses. Based on this, we discuss commonalities and differences in both scenarios, from the educational and cultural point of view, and how these influence students’ performance and satisfaction. Finally, we reflect on our experiences and lessons learned, together with our ideas for improving educational setup and functionalities for future LearnWeb2.0 based courses.

CLIL: CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

CLIL Education

In the curricular model (Zydatiß, 2007) the role of language in the CLIL classroom is different to traditional foreign language learning. It is a medium through which specific subject content
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