

Chatter That Matters — The Importance of Talk in the Language Classroom

Tilka S. Brown

Abstract—This paper is based upon real, everyday teaching experiences in the primary school language classroom. It is not a written summary of formal research per se, but rather an overview of my own observations and work conducted in classrooms. Fieldwork yes, but without the formalities and restrictions that can often be associated with structured studies. Rather, I have observed teachers and students working in their natural teaching and learning environments; settings in which I had a very minimal presence. My intentions for joining these classes was to always ‘blend-in’ and to document my findings of existing practises. My observations form the content of this paper whilst also discussing the issues surrounding the all-too frequent concept of “boring” schooling. It highlights the impact of the negative teacher and the detrimental effect this has upon the students within a language classroom - or any classroom for that matter. Finally, this paper discusses the resulting impact of introducing new teaching strategies and techniques, the ‘tools’ for enhancing language programs. Change needs to occur, it must occur. The reality is, the current teaching method used by a large majority of teachers in schools all over the world isn’t working - and it hasn’t been working for a very long time. Quite frankly, this is not good enough - our children deserve more.

Index Terms—CLIL, language education, primary school programs, positive teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

The bitter taste of vending-machine espresso lingers in my mouth. I had consumed my caffeine fix with too much vigour and now my tongue was stinging and felt burnt as a result. But there was no time to lament. I threw the plastic shot-like cup into the bin and followed my escort down the corridor. I was en route to another Italian classroom, this time, a fifth-year elementary class. I walked in and was greeted with the usual sight of students standing to attention, their desks lined-up in perfect rows. I smiled at the sea of faces, all gazing at me in bewilderment. “*Who is she?*” their expressions ask. “*Why is she in our classroom?*” I can hear their questions without hearing any words. Aside from the scraping of chair-legs as the students sit back down, the room is silent. They are waiting for me to talk. After a very brief introduction (accompanied with the obligatory translation by their teacher), I move past the students and take my seat towards the back of the room. Mostly out of sight and hopefully, out of mind. I want to remain as inconspicuous as possible so that the classroom remains in its ‘natural’ state and the usual ebb and flow continues despite my presence. This can sometimes prove difficult; particularly when the Class Clown is trying his

best to impress me with his chair-balancing act. I ignore him, even though I wish to remind him of his manners. I bite my tongue and look past him. That’s not my job today; I’m not here to teach or to enforce Crowd Control Management Systems... I’m here to observe the English lesson. This means watching the teaching and learning process, watching the dynamics between the students and their teacher and between the students themselves. I’m here to listen to everything all around me and to silently take notes, no talking allowed. This is a self-imposed rule although ironically, it was also the one Golden Rule of the classroom.

The scenario described above is typical for many of my observational classes. I walk in, introduce myself and sit down out of the way. I have joined many classes across many year levels and in many different schools; primary and secondary. Of course there were differences and contrasts between the lessons. Some classes had more students than others; some teachers were more welcoming than others; some schools had access to better teaching facilities than others... Always though, the same classroom expectation was enforced: talking is not tolerated. Mmmm. This had me baffled. Why oh why, were students in a *language* class forbidden to talk? Is this not some sort of peculiar oxymoron?! At first, I thought I was within the realm of a particularly strict teacher. I myself didn’t dare put a toe out of line... But after my fourth observation class, I began to realise that this authoritarian teaching style was more than a personality trait; this was how the language teachers, generally speaking, thought their classrooms should ‘be.’ Not only were the rooms filled with tension, but often the lesson content was rather dull. My goodness; if I was feeling weary with the work, I can only imagine how the students must be feeling... Perhaps they have more patience than me. Perhaps they are afraid of the consequences for not doing as asked by their teacher? Or perhaps, they simply don’t know any different?

II. MAKING THE UNKNOWN WELL-KNOWN

There is a great level of ‘unknowingness’ on the faces of the students and teachers that I’ve met and continue to meet on my teaching travels. I’m not intending to sound cynical - teachers and their students generally only know one main style for language teaching and learning and well, if “*this is how it has always been done,*” why does anything need to change? Because it must change. The current system is broken and our students are not receiving the education that they deserve. Primary school language programs need a complete overhaul. Students’ interest and engagement levels in language-learning need to be captured and maintained from the first, early years of schooling to allow for further study to continue into their secondary years.

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In recent times, there has been a gradual decline in student participation rates (beyond the compulsory years) of additional language programs - around the world. A Guardian survey conducted in Britain of young people and language learning [1] found that; *more than four in ten students of Spanish, Italian, Russian and Japanese say they would even "have difficulty understanding, speaking or writing anything" and for Mandarin students, almost half have not progressed beyond this level...* Further findings highlighted that although students are inspired to learn a language by the idea of speaking (it), the academic focus on writing and assessments is "off-putting." The students have recognised that the authenticity of language-learning lies in the ability to speak the language in meaningful contexts. As Hart [2] writes; *assessment is authentic when it involves students in tasks that are worthwhile, significant and meaningful.* Why then, are language programs continued to be driven by such rigid, monotonous schedules and comprised of only "Turn to Page Ten" textbook-style lessons? Surely, there is far greater merit in developing a language program that not only accounts for mandatory assessment tasks, but does so through lessons that accommodate the interests and different learning needs of the students? Lessons which actually *allow* students to put their skills into practice - lessons that let children talk.

Luke [3] points out that *language learning is centrally connected to language socialisation, social roles and norms associated with language use.* Therefore teaching and learning in the language classroom shouldn't always be about the final score on an exam paper: learning another language is learning about life so it should therefore *be* about real life. Existing programs can be enhanced: textbooks can sometimes be left closed and yes, teaching and learning can even extend beyond the four classroom walls! But first, greater awareness of what needs to occur and why must be established. Change cannot happen unless the reason for implementing the change is clearly understood by all those involved. And so the educators must be educated - but how?

First, it must be reiterated that the current dire status of language classrooms is not entirely the fault of the teachers - the finger of blame cannot be solely pointed at them. These teachers are often teaching in isolation and they don't know what they don't know. A revamp can only occur if *all* school staff are willing to work together with a 'top-down' approach. School leaders along with teachers, classroom helpers et al, need to be promoting and sharing the same message about their schools' approach to languages. Decisions need to be made, teaching strategies trialled and policies agreed upon. This can be a daunting task, particularly for schools that have always done things in the way that they have always been done. Implementing change in such an environment can therefore be somewhat overwhelming. The fear of the unknown creeps about the staffroom. This is perfectly normal. Of course it can feel scary to try something new, particularly when you have a room-full of volatile youngsters as your test subjects... But always on the other side of fear lies the MAGIC of the moment! And it is precisely this element which is currently missing from too many primary school language classrooms.

The teaching and learning process ought to be an enjoyable experience; for students and for their teachers. Classrooms

need to sparkle and shine and students should feel excited to learn! It breaks my heart when I hear of children who "*hate school*" or "*hate*" going to their language classes. Hate is such a strong word and unfortunately, it is used far too often. My first question is always "*But why?*" even though I know the reasons. They always have the same response; "*It's boring.*" Yes, it is. Chances are, the teachers are not enjoying the work either. But things can be done differently. The following is a suggestion for a possible starting point:

A team of teachers within a school need to be given the title of 'Language Leaders' (or similar) and together, they are to become the schools' main advocates for the language program. I reiterate that the need for this task is to be undertaken by a team of teachers and not solely left to the responsibility of the language specialist teacher - they cannot do this job alone. Once formed, the initial role of this group is to seek data and research from a myriad of resources which gives proven results for student achievement and engagement levels in effective language programs. This is needed because those who may oppose languages education will need to be convinced, with raw data, of the benefits for including languages into their curriculum. They want and will need to see results.

After this collection process has occurred, the Language Leaders must arrange a meeting to share this information with all school staff. This is important because in order for the school to establish a strong approach with their language program, all staff must be made aware of the same facts. Everyone must hear and understand the same information. Following this discussion, a decision must be reached regarding which changes can be implemented first. Points to consider include "*What is the 'best-fit' for our students?*" "*Do we have the resources available (now)?*" and "*Who will do what?*" Whatever is decided, it must be done so in the presence of all staff so that all members feel that they have contributed to the change. This is particularly important if there are resistant or pessimistic colleagues at your school.

Next, prepare for a potential onslaught. Whenever a change is implemented in a school, there is nearly always some level of backlash from the broader community (parents, grandparents etc). This is a result of their own fears: they are merely concerned about the schools supposed 'wrong-doings' against their child's academic progress because they don't yet understand the reasons for the changes. To combat this, the teachers must feel confident in their knowledge of the changes and have well-formed explanations ready for *those* conversations. Teachers must form a united front and stand firm in our role as the professional - because this is exactly who we are. The parents of course know their children, but in actual fact, it is us who really know how their child learns best as a student in our classrooms. Displaying this level of confidence provides comfort and reassurance for those raising their concerns. It also demonstrates that teachers really do have their child's best interests in mind.

III. FROM BORING TO BRILLIANT

Now that your teachers have become knowledgeable in the benefits of additional language learning and can easily promote whole-school curriculum changes, it's time for the

lessons to come to life! Colour, light and laughter should become prerequisites to classroom teaching practises. As should talking - yes, permission for the students to talk. Hornsby and Wilson (2011) [4] explain that *opportunities for children to develop their oral language are essential and all classrooms must have rich oral language programs*. Developing a language requires us to talk and so we must provide our students with rich opportunities in our classrooms to enable them to practise in a safe, learning environment. I'm not referring to students remaining at their desks in perfect rows, politely reciting repetitious (and often boring) songs about grammar rules. Although this type of dialogue still does have a place in some instances of instruction, it can often become too controlled for the language classroom and therefore not a very efficient method for the development of HOTS - Higher Order Thinking Skills. Students must be engaged in authentic conversations about their learning. The talk needs to be real and to occur naturally.

To support these situations, students must be aware of the learning intentions for the lesson. These must be explained clearly by the teacher so that students understand what they're learning and why. Furthermore, the students need to be aware of how their learning will be assessed, they must know what their teachers are 'looking for' in their learning. An Australian study, *the Classroom Discourse Project* [5].

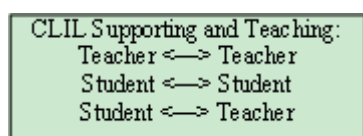


Fig. 1. Supportive classroom.

(Cormack, Wignell, Nichols, Bills & Lucas, 1998) was conducted to describe classroom practises that enhance speaking and listening skills. (See Fig. 1) The results indicated that *teachers can be highly influential in shaping classroom talk so that it aids student learning*. In these scenarios, the teacher is scaffolding the type of dialogue required for the lesson so it becomes highly relevant for the students (The Digest, 2009) [6]. The learning intentions are clear - the teacher is supporting the conversations between his/her students. In these classrooms, there is a gentle 'hummm' of students talking and learning together. High energy levels coincide with the students eagerness to learn more - this is a very positive learning space. The CLIL teaching methodology fits beautifully within these types of classrooms.

CLIL is an acronym for 'Content and Language Integrated Learning' and as described by Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010:1) [7] it is a "...*dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language.*" It is teaching a particular skill or subject area through another language. Although this may sound a little daunting, it is actually rather straight-forward and very achievable. But teachers can be a dubious bunch, especially at the mere thought of adding another layer to their already tight timetables. From surveys and discussions I've had with many teachers, it is apparent that there are three main reasons why additional language programs are not often (if at all) integrated into the generalist classroom:

- 1) "I don't have enough time... My planner is already so full..."
- 2) "I can't speak [insert language] - I can't teach that!"
- 3) "We don't have the right equipment..."

Mmmmm.... Time, skills and resources. Sound familiar? Well, there is actually enough of each already available in schools - even time! Yes, dare I say it, teaching through CLIL can actually *save* time!

The very nature of CLIL teaching and learning brings people together. Language teachers and subject and/or classroom teachers must collaborate to develop the unit. As Hattie (2012:viii) [8] identifies, *it is a community of teachers that is needed to work together to ask the questions, evaluate their impact, and decide on the optimal next steps*. The fusion of skills and knowledge between teachers allows for a very well supported program for all involved; students and teachers alike. Planning the lessons may also involve input from the students which can be of particular benefit when working with high-school students. If they are given the opportunity to express what and how they wish to learn, then their attention and interest *for* learning has already been captured, prior to the commencement of teaching. Then just as with the teachers, it becomes *the community of students who work together in the pursuit of progress* (Hattie, 2012). This can be especially important in the language classroom and is a successful tactic for enhancing student engagement levels. CLIL teaching creates an effective team-teaching environment because both teachers are able to deliver their areas of expertise with confidence. If they encounter any unfamiliar content, their colleague is on-hand to provide assistance. This level of support is also mirrored between the students and also between students and teachers:

I refer to this last connection (Student <--> Teacher) as '*The Sideways Ladder*' approach to teaching and learning. *The Sideways Ladder* is a modified version of the metaphorical ladder that I believe exists in (too) many primary school classrooms. Many teachers have a tendency to place themselves high-up 'above' their students, as if on the top rung of a ladder. Whilst I understand that teachers are the figure of authority in a classroom, I feel that the hierarchical gap between the teacher and their students need not be so apparent. That is to say, there needs to be a shift away from the directorship-style of teaching and a move towards the teacher as being a facilitator of learning, gently guiding students to naturally discover the learning for themselves. Teachers also need to accept that they have a dual-role in the classroom, that they are also learners. It is ok not to know everything; no-one is born knowing everything! Nor does learning ever cease! As educators, we must remember that we too are life-long learners. Learning also occurs outside of our classrooms and our students acquire knowledge from a myriad of external resources. It is therefore very realistic for our students to sometimes answer the questions that we cannot. Teachers must overcome the fear of 'not knowing' and instead accept situations in which their students can become the teacher: allowing the role-reversal to occur.

CLIL lessons naturally create these *Sideways Ladder* moments. In these positive shared learning environments, it becomes possible for the students to teach new skills, facts or

vocabulary to their teachers and for everyone to learn together - the previous metaphorical ladder has been turned on its' side. At either end of this new ladder, are the students and their teacher, all free to move safely along the rungs, teaching and learning from each other on the same balanced platform. This isn't to say that differentiation cannot occur-quite the contrary! Children learn in many different ways; classrooms are a mixed-bag of learning styles. A good teacher not only understands and acknowledges this of his/her students, but caters for these when planning the lesson content.

When planning CLIL activities, it is therefore important to remember to keep the lessons flexible. Of course there must be a plan in place. But in my experience, I have found that it is often the lessons which have deviated from initial plans are the ones that turn out to be most effective. This is because the teaching and learning is occurring naturally. Students become so immersed in the task at-hand, they often don't realise that they are using the target language - they don't need to think about it and the pressure for achieving 'perfection' is alleviated.

These positive conversations can only occur if the layout of the classroom is conducive to do so - not many natural conversations occur with people sitting in rows. Safe learning environments (that is, non-threatening situations in which students feel that making a mistake is ok) and opportunities for multilingual learning will greatly assist students in their acquisition of the target language: *a child who is exposed to a language, learns it* (Liles, 1975:22) [9] Such exposure must be regular and meaningful for the students. Oh and also, permission to talk must first be granted by the teacher.

I have taught many CLIL lessons in Italian classrooms. Upon my arrival, I always do a scan of the room and obtain a quick feel of the student dynamics. Nine times out of ten, I find that the students are sitting in rows at their own individual desk. Although they will still learn skills and knowledge seated like this, they are capable of achieving far greater results if seated with peers in small groups. So before I begin teaching, I move all furniture and arrange the students into table-groups - much to their complete surprise and great shock of their teacher! I do this because allowing students to work in supportive table-groups alleviates the fear of making a mistake. They can instead relax into their learning and laugh at their errors. They also have the benefit of seeking assistance from their peers instead of always needing to rely on the teacher. This is a much happier language-learning environment.

For too long, language-classes have focussed purely on perfection; ensuring that all pronunciation, punctuation and grammatical aspects of the language are learnt perfectly. Whilst I agree that this is important for language development, I feel that the teaching methods for these skills are outdated. Sadly I have witnessed lessons in which children, as young as seven, were chastised for their inability to read a passage correctly... There they stood, at the front of their classroom, in front of their peers, with their teacher barking demands from the side; growling at the mistakes instead of praising the attempts. The rest of the class were shrinking in their seats, with terrified looks of *"Please don't pick me next..."* plastered across their faces. In this third-year classroom, there wasn't any laughter or fun - there was only a strong sense of

unease, fear even, in the air. It was awful - and wrong.

A proper, well-structured CLIL classroom isn't like this. I believe that talking should be encouraged in CLIL lessons and so this is what I expect of my students. Yes, I encourage them to make noise! For some teachers watching me in their classrooms, this is too much to endure - they cannot relax with the apparent 'out-of-controlness' that is occurring before their very eyes. They stomp about the room, shooshing everyone and demanding *"Silenzio!"* On several occasions, I've had to politely explain that *"This is ok, I want them to talk."* Sometimes however, my gentle explanation was either ignored or misunderstood and I was then required to be quite firm - with the teacher(!) I had to insist that they please *allow* the students talk between themselves - how can improvement occur otherwise? After a while, the teachers usually relax. They begin to see their students supporting each other and understand that Happy Students = Confident Students and that Confident Students = Enthusiastic Learners. But unfortunately, this cannot be said for all teachers.

IV. EXIT STAGE LEFT

There is a big difference between language teaching and effective language teaching. In the preceding sections I have already highlighted several features of what I believe constitute an effective language program. However, these elements cannot work unless the teacher is also an effective practitioner and a positive role model. Our students look up to us: they remember phrases and moments that for us, are insignificant. This is why it is so very important that teachers ALWAYS strive to be great! Yes teaching is challenging at times and no, we don't always have the best equipment for our lessons - the classroom may be nothing more than four blank walls. This is irrelevant because the most valuable asset to any classroom is an enthusiastic, positive and dedicated teacher. It is our responsibility, our duty, to bring the colour and light to our classrooms, to help our students to see the MAGIC that comes with learning an another language!

Generally speaking, most teachers enjoy what they do - thank-goodness! We understand that teaching is more than "a job." In its true essence, teaching for us is a calling. The students in our care become "our kids" and we live and breathe our work to do as much as we can for them every day. But not all teachers think like this. There are teachers who arrive at school, two minutes before the morning bell. They bark and shout at their students all day long, sculk around with a scowl on their face and leave again with the afternoon mass exodus. These are the teachers who are forever counting the days until the weekend. Why are these teachers still teaching? More to the point, why are they *allowed* to still be teaching?

One component of effective instruction as identified by Jim Ysseldyke and his team (1997:3) [10] is that *Managing Instruction is the degree to which there is a sense of positiveness in the school environment*. How can a pessimistic teacher create a positive learning environment for their students?! They can't! These teachers must first alter their own attitudes and make a mindful shift from negative thinking to positive thinking. This is a cause that I feel incredibly passionate about and is a big reason why I do what

I do. I am on a mission to improve language education programs for the sake of children everywhere. Because if there are teachers as described above standing before a class of future-leaders, what kind of future are they creating? It's no wonder students associate language education with negativity. These teachers do a complete disservice to the profession.

The language classroom should be a place in which students feel safe to take risks with their learning. With each challenge that they face and with each fear that they overcome, the students develop higher levels of confidence. This in turn allows them to progress towards greater accomplishments under the dutiful guidance of their teacher. They adopt a "I'll give it my best shot" attitude and the fear of making a mistake is virtually non-existent because anxiety levels have been alleviated. The students' attitudes are therefore a direct reflection of the encouragement and support expressed by their teacher. With the right attitude demonstrated by the right teacher, any child is capable of blossoming to their full potential. If you set high expectations for your students, they will always strive to reach them.

I mentioned earlier that as part of *The Sideways Ladder* approach to teaching, teachers have a dual-role in the CLIL classroom; that of teacher/facilitator and as a learner. Just as the students are developing in confidence, so too are the teachers. With each CLIL activity, the teacher becomes more comfortable with this style of teaching. They become better at being the learner, at accepting help from their students; better at being flexible and allowing lessons to change; better at letting-go of rigid, repetitious lesson plans... They become better teachers. This journey is different for all teachers, new and experienced. Some are more reluctant than others to try because as already discussed, change can be scary. But they must try - how will they know otherwise? Shifting the mindset and allowing the initial veil of trepidation to be lifted will bring positive results to your classroom; for you as the teacher and for your students.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed various suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning practises in primary school language classrooms. The existing methods are not working and haven't been working for quite some time. This became overtly apparent to me after observing a myriad of lessons throughout many different classrooms - in Australia and in Italy. Student engagement levels were very low and it didn't take long for me to understand why. A combination of monotonous lesson content, repetitious rote-learning styles, ridiculous rules and outdated classroom layout all contribute to high levels of disengagement. Sadly however, I also found that in far too many cases the cause of students' aversion to language-learning was due to the negative approach of their teacher. This is something that I find difficult to understand. Attempts should be praised, not ridiculed. It is our duty as educators to hold the beacon of light for our students, to gently guide their learning, to teach them an "I can..." attitude. To teach is to inspire. It is indeed a great honour to be a teacher. I therefore request that if you don't love what you do, please leave the classroom.

Thankfully, there are many excellent teachers who are dedicated to and passionate about improving the language-learning outcomes for their students. These teachers love what they do and these teachers need to stick together to become a united front. They can work in team-teaching situations and learn from each other; planning, teaching and enjoying a fantastic CLIL unit with their students. Allowing the chatter, encouraging the conversations, letting their students discover the learning for themselves. Positive noise is learning noise - let it happen! Tables can be moved, rows can be broken. These are plenty of room for The Sideways Ladder - become amazed at what your students can teach you! The power of positive teaching nurtures the delicate souls of our students. Be kind and be patient, with yourself also. I believe that if schools and language teachers begin implementing some of the above, then the future of primary school language education programs will be vastly improved. It can't be all done at once, but starting somewhere and starting small is better than not starting at all! Students will shine and classrooms will be filled with light and love. And that is worth talking about, in any language.

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