

Applying Innovation to CLIL

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Abstract This paper describes a successful experience of flipped classroom conducted at the University of Salento, Italy, with students of English of the Courses of Study in Science of Primary Education, for the past three years. The initiative arises from the realisation that the traditional lecture does not work anymore with the new generations of students who need different stimuli in order to get the appropriate skills and competences required for their future profession. In a traditional lecture, students just take notes and try to memorise notions so as to pass the final exams and, after that, they tend to forget most of what they studied during the course.

Moreover, in spite of the awareness of the importance of speaking English today, and in spite of various reforms aimed at achieving better competence, Italian students graduating from secondary schools, generally enter University with a low-level competence in the language.

The pedagogical model of the flipped classroom applied to CLIL, along with strategies of non-formal education, involving team-work and problem-solving, based on the principle of learning by doing, were used to introduce theoretical topics and to perform a number of activities aimed at inclusion and intercultural education. Through active participation in discussion, different tasks assigned which required critical thinking, creativity and the use of communication technologies in creating several products, the students were able to master the theoretical topics planned for the course as well as the teaching approaches, methodologies and strategies to put them into practice in their future jobs.

Keywords: flipped classroom, CLIL, technology, active and cooperative learning, interaction, critical thinking, creativity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

My decision to use the pedagogical model of flipped classroom, three years ago, arose from two considerations. First of all the realisation that the traditional lecture is no longer adequate for the new generations of students who need different stimuli in order to get the skills and competences required for their future profession, in this instance, primary school teachers. Years of teaching experience made me realise that what students do, during the traditional lecture, is just take notes in a passive manner and then try to memorise notions so as to pass the final exams and, after that, they tend to forget most of what they studied during the course.

Second, every new academic year, I have to deal with the problem of students who cannot communicate in English. In fact, in spite of the awareness of the importance of speaking English today, and in spite of various reforms aimed at achieving better competence, Italian students graduating from secondary schools, generally do not reach even a low-level competence in the language. The teaching of English as part of the curriculum in primary school was introduced in the 1990s, and reinforced by a number of successive reforms. Therefore, students enrolling in university nowadays have studied English for more than ten years. However, most of them lament problems with the language in school, problems with teachers' methods, and some are even anxious about it. Of course, the problem is not with the students. If they were able to learn their mother tongue, often a dialect, and the Italian language, they should be able to learn another language as well. Thus the problem must lie somewhere else, in other words, in the Italian educational system. And the main problem with the Italian system at all levels, in my opinion, is the tendency to regard the teaching of Foreign Languages as any other subject matter. At all levels means starting from Ministerial educational policies, through planning, methodologies and teacher training, organisation of timetables, to the actual teaching in the classroom, which is today affected by heavy cuts on funding, and therefore, a lack of appropriate structures, teaching aids, etc.

However, the main problem affecting the teaching of English in Italian schools is the lack of appropriate teacher training, and the problem becomes more relevant for primary school teachers. It is well known that the sooner children are exposed to a foreign language, the better they can master it. Nonetheless, a great number of teachers of English in primary school lack an adequate competence to do this job, mostly because of the lack of teacher training.

At a public examination for 1,027 posts as primary school teachers held last June in Italy, only 826 candidates passed, and those who failed were found unable to translate their theoretical knowledge into teaching practice. Since

my students will hopefully be teaching in primary school, the challenging task I faced was twofold: Teaching English and, at the same time, teaching my students to teach the language to primary school children, and I wanted to do so in a stimulating, involving, and effective way. I decided to provide them with a solid theoretical basis, as well as a great deal of practice, through an innovative approach, the flipped classroom applied to CLIL, which is called “development of specific transversal competences” in Italian universities, along with a number of non-formal education strategies.

In my teaching experience, I have always used a content-based approach, aimed at teaching and learning content, chosen according to the students’ course of study, through the medium of English, thus teaching theoretical content and relevant vocabulary, which could be useful for the students’ future profession, and the language at the same time. The approach is similar to CLIL, strongly supported by the European Commission and required by the Italian Ministry of Education.

I have always found this approach to teaching English effective since students are exposed to a great amount of authentic, stimulating material in the target language, which provides useful information, and therefore intrinsic motivation for the students who are involved in activities that require the active and meaningful use of the language. Three years ago, when I set up to use the flipped classroom model, I decided that I would continue to use a teaching approach based on content chosen from a number of subjects across the students’ curriculum, since I was sure that it was very effective in providing my students with the necessary vocabulary and concepts related to their course of study, as well as the competence needed for their future profession.

The content of my syllabus for the course of study in Primary Education therefore included: An overview of the history of English and its worldwide spread; the resulting emergence of a number of varieties of the language, or World Englishes, with a focus on the differences between the British and the American standards; International English and its use as a tool for intercultural education; theories of learning; teaching methodologies; the Critical Period Hypothesis; teaching English to young learners; intercultural and inclusive education, thus involving subjects such as history, pedagogy, psychology, didactics and also some geography.

In this experience the difference lies in the media used for the presentation of content, which is no longer delivered through lectures and the use of printed material such as books or handouts, but through videos, slides, text files, and other digital resources posted on a social learning platform, which the students watch by themselves before coming to classes.

1.1 Teacher-student interaction in the flipped classroom model

This new teaching methodology is attributed to two American teachers, A. Sams e J. Bergmann, who, in 2007, facing the problem of having to waste their time to repeat the lessons for absent students (in the USA, often students are involved in sport activities and competitions) found a way to solve it by using a particular software that enabled them to record their lessons and to post them online. The idea was appreciated not only by absent students, but also by those who attended classes who, in this way, had the opportunity to review and study more in depth their content.

In this innovative model students spend the time traditionally devoted to homework watching videos, slides and other digital material posted by the teacher on a dedicated platform. While viewing the material, the students follow the instructions provided by the teacher that usually involve answering questions and taking notes of key words and concepts. The time traditionally devoted to lectures is used for interactive discussion in the classroom and a number of other activities with the guidance of the teacher who uses a Socratic method by asking questions that stimulate reflection and critical thinking, and the students work together to find answers to the questions and to solve possible problems.

This approach requires a radical change in the role of the teacher who is no longer the main source of knowledge and information delivered by his/her desk as in the traditional lecture, but a facilitator who guides the students in their learning process. As A. King says, “From sage on the stage to guide on the side”.¹

By re-defining the roles of teacher and students and better exploiting the time they spend in the classroom together, their relationship is strongly enhanced. The teacher has more time to verify individual learning processes, clarify possible misunderstanding of concepts and provide the students with immediate feedback while he/she follows them in the various activities. As Bergmann and Sams state, the most important advantages of this approach are deeply human as the teacher can work individually with each student every day, also with those students who are less motivated and usually sit in the last rows.²

In the traditional lecture only the most engaged students tend to ask questions and the teacher is aware that many students hardly understand its content. Yet he/she does not have enough time to interact with all of them individually. By

¹A. King, “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side”, in *College Teaching*, 41 (1), 1993, pp. 30-35. http://www.edweek.org/articles/2012/10/03/06khan_ep.h32.html

²Bergmann, J. & Sams, A., *Flip your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day*, International Society for Technology in Education, Washington, 2012.

organising activities that allow students to work in pairs or in groups, in which all the students are involved, he/she can deal with issues and problems when the students come across them, by walking around the classroom, checking their work, interacting with them and providing immediate support. In this regard, Enfield, who applies this model to his courses at California State University Northridge, sees in the component of support the specific rationale for its use, and reports the difficulty students often encounter with the didactic material and the opportunity that working in the classroom offers.³

In my experience, the flipped classroom enables the teacher – in his/her role as guide and facilitator of learning – to establish a highly positive relationship with all the students, which results in stronger motivation and better results. Generally speaking, students tend to link the subject with the teacher. At the beginning of the academic year, when I ask them to tell me the reasons why they think their English is so poor, most of them lament problems with their teachers and the method they used to teach the language during their school years. On the contrary, those few students who come to university classes with a good knowledge of the language, say that their school teachers were very clever. Therefore, a good relationship between teacher and students can produce better results.

As university language courses are supported by mother-tongue collaborators who take care of grammar and phonetics, and since I considered my collaborator, Lucy Colaianni, a valid and competent teacher, I decided to involve her in this innovative experience and asked her to be present by my side during classes. This choice proved very useful because, besides rendering the learning process more stimulating and lively (students could listen to different views on a issue, different experiences, thus further stimulating their critical thinking), students had the opportunity to reflect on the most common problems they have with English grammar and phonetics as they emerged from class discussion, on line tasks and other activities, and receive immediate remedial feedback. In this way, we had the possibility to re-modulate the time spent in the classroom to add activities that were not planned in advance, in order to solve these problems or to meet other students' requirements. What characterises the flipped classroom, in fact, is its flexibility and the opportunity it offers to vary the activities so as to meet the students' different needs as they arise, and which are not predictable. In other words, the teacher must be ready to change and adapt the activities planned based on the students' responses. When using a flipped classroom model, there is a lot of ongoing planning, yet a

³Enfield, J., "Looking at the impact of the flipped classroom model of instruction on undergraduate multimedia students at CSUN" in *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, 57(6), 14-27, 2013. Doi:10.1007/s11528-013-0698-1, p. 4.

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teacher can never predict what will happen in the classroom due to the relevant role played by the students and their responses.

2. PERSONALISED EDUCATION

Every teacher is aware that students come to classes with different socio-cultural background, different abilities and learning styles, and therefore, one single teaching method cannot meet the diverse students' needs. However, taking into account the number of student attending university courses and the limited number of hours available, the task of providing personalised education is quite impossible. Bergmann and Sams observe:

The present model of education reflects the age in which it was designed: the industrial revolution. Students are educated in an assembly line to make their standardized education efficient. They are asked to sit in nice neat rows, listen to an "expert" expound on a subject, and recall the learned information on an exam. Yet somehow, in this climate, all students are expected to receive the same education. The weakness of the traditional approach is that not all students come to class prepared to learn. Some lack adequate background for the material, are uninterested in the subject, or have simply been disenchanting with the present educational model.⁴

Flipping the classroom and using technologies allow the teacher to vary strategies and activities, thus ensuring a personalised education without resorting to additional hours and without having to sacrifice part of the content. As Becker and Watts say:

Great orators should lecture. The rest of us should consider using a variety of teaching methods to actively engage our students and reduce the amount of time we spend lecturing to audiences that are often captive in the short run [...]. Variety in the pace and format of undergraduate classroom instruction may well be the missing spice of good teaching and more enthusiastic learning.⁵

During the traditional lecture the teacher realises that many students do not follow or understand the content, sometimes using their smart phones or chatting with their mates, and often sitting in the back rows so as not to be noticed by the teacher. Moreover, since their role is passive, their attention span is very limited and tends to decrease after the first fifteen minutes (which is a very

⁴ Bergmann, J. & Sams, A., Flip your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day, cit., p. 6.

⁵ Becker, W.E. e Watts, M. (1995), "Teaching tools: Teaching methods in undergraduate economics", in Economic Inquiry, 33, (October), 1995, pp. 699.

short span thinking that our lessons last two or three hours!). Furthermore, I often realise, especially during the exams, that most students tend to memorise the content of the lectures and are unable to apply the knowledge acquired in a critical way or to connect the pieces of information in a logical way. In this regard, J. Michael states, “The student’s traditional role is that of a passive note-taker and regurgitator of factual information. What is urgently needed is an educational program in which students become interested in actively knowing, rather than passively believing”.⁶

Teachers working at all levels of education today cannot ignore the cultural change brought about by communication technologies, which can be compared to the transformation caused by the invention of the press in the 15th century. In this new scenario, the traditional lecture, based on passive learning, on memorisation rather than on understanding, where students’ creativity has no place, which does not encourage students to question what the teacher says, or to associate the lecture content to their previous knowledge, can have meaning only when combined with a variety of active methodologies, that is to say, student-centred teaching strategies aimed at inclusion that stimulate creativity through practical activities where all the students are actively involved.

Teaching by using digital technologies can have many advantages. Our students were born in the age of communication technologies and are often better at using them than us teachers. Therefore, it is natural for them to use digital devices. After all, they often do it compulsively and will have the need to use them in any workplace! Engaging the students in a creative and demanding way, in order to process content and knowledge, becomes fruitful for their vocational education.

The new technologies can be useful educational tools for providing academic competence, yet, when appropriately used, can also foster social and emotional skills, thus strengthening rather than hindering human interaction. Technology-based teaching can help the teacher to personalise learning, engage students who are not motivated, connect the material they view at home with classwork, thus extending learning outside the classroom, and give students who cannot attend classes, or miss some classes, the opportunity to follow the work being done and to be constantly updated. The challenging task of the teacher is trying to change the new generations of students from passive users of technologies into active creators.

Of course, technologies are just teaching tools – the most recent a teacher has at hand. What really matters is the pedagogy underlying their use, according to E. Mazur, who developed the concept of “Peer Instruction” and

⁶Michael, J., “Where’s the evidence that active learning works?”, in *Adv Physiol Educ* 30, 2006, pp. 159-167.

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who has been using this kind of approaches at Harvard University since the early 1990s, “Technology should be at the service of pedagogy, not the other way round.”⁷ In a conference on teaching and learning held at Harvard, Mazur, who criticises the traditional model of lecture, which in his opinion places a lot of emphasis on transfer of information from teacher to students, states that this model has no meaning in an age where the sources of information become more and more plentiful. “Central to teaching should not be transferring information, but helping students to assimilate information”⁸, and it also should require students to do so in ways that help them solve problems. The opening question he asked his audience was how they learned to do their jobs and just a few of them replied from lectures, while most of them answered through practice. Therefore Mazur said, “We don’t learn this way. Why should we teach this way?”⁹

2.1 Skill and competences

Today’s advancements in communication technology are changing the workplace, thus requiring new skills and competences. In order to meet the new requirements, the educational system has to undergo a transformation and provide the students with adequate skills and competences so that they may thrive in this changing work environment. The World Economic Forum indicates a number of skills that students require to work in the 21st century, listing literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy and cultural and civic literacy as foundational skills; critical thinking/problem-solving, creativity, communication and collaboration as competencies to approach complex challenges; as well as curiosity, initiative, persistence/grit, adaptability, leadership, and social and cultural awareness as character qualities needed to approach a changing environment.¹⁰

Besides forming my students to become good teachers, I was aware that I had to offer them also the opportunity to develop these other necessary skills and competences. Therefore, the strategies underlying the activities performed in my model of flipped classroom are meant to provide the students with the skills that are essential for their future jobs. For this reason, the activities described below, besides the achievement of linguistic competence in English and teacher training, imply critical thinking and problem solving, cooperative learning, team work, decision making and tend to stimulate communication,

⁷See video: BLC11 Keynote: Eric Mazur on Vimeo, Mazur’s Conference at Harvard University, 2006: <https://vimeo.com/29844728>

⁸Ibidem.

⁹Ibidem.

¹⁰5 Charts that explain the future of education, World Economic Forum, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/5-charts-that-explain-the-future-of-education/>

cognitive flexibility, peer learning and creativity in the production of artifacts as well as in planning their own lessons.

2.2 Active and meaningful learning

As stated above, the use of digital technologies for educational purposes should not be ignored with the new generations of students. However, we should remember that students also need to develop their interpersonal abilities in order to take active part in the social, economic, and cultural life of today's society. Recent studies, moreover, show that people who spend a lot of time on computers at work, and have to reply to a great number of emails, can risk stress and depression, while reducing the number of hours devoted to computer work not only reduces stress, it may also increase their productivity.¹¹

For this reason, in my courses, a great deal of hours spent in the classroom involve a series of practical activities done with traditional resources, where students are physically involved through the use of non-formal educational strategies based on the principle of learning by doing. All the activities imply active learning, meant as the process of engaging the students in tasks in which they have to reflect on concepts and ideas, think critically and use such concepts in a creative, playful way. In other words, students are actively involved in their learning process and responsible for it.

All the activities, conducted either through the use of digital technologies or traditional resources, imply teaching strategies aimed at promoting social and emotional skills as well as assimilating the academic content, by focusing on the students' ability to communicate and collaborate in a friendly and safe environment, therefore educating them to listen to others and to share information.

Each class starts with an icebreaker, at the beginning of the course, or an energizer, in the following classes. These are brief, game-like activities in which the students are involved in physical movement, problem-solving, and have a lot of fun. These activities are useful to create a warm and comfortable, stress-free learning environment, where all the students get to know each other – not only those who usually sit next to their best friend –, to raise the level of their energy or to relax after a boring lecture, to encourage the involvement of all, stimulate team-building and cohesion within the larger group, to prepare for concentration, motivate and encourage class discussion, thus favouring meaningful learning.

One of the icebreakers we use with new students, is done with a yarn of wool. The yarn is passed from one student to the other randomly so that, in the

¹¹Schrobsdorff, Susanna, (2017) "There is no right way to unplug from work", in Time Europe, January 30, 2017, pp.15-16.

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end, all students sitting in a circle are connected through a web. As the yarn is unravelled, each student has to briefly introduce him/herself and say, “I’m good at...” and “I’d like to be better at...”. From this activity each student’s skills and competences emerge, and data are collected, based on which different groups, with a more or less fair representation of skills, are later formed. A follow-up discussion ensues in which the students reflect on the aims of the activity. Besides practising grammar structures through repetition in the process of yarn unravelling, the activity has another purpose. The web-like pattern resulting from the activity visually introduces the overall objective of the course, which the students themselves realise and define guided by a proper “coaching”. They come to understand the importance of cooperative learning and that each student has something to offer to and something to learn from the other group members. They also realise how an engaging and stimulating task can result in a learning experience with very little effort, and have fun in the process.

The strategies underlying, not only the icebreakers and energizers, but all the class activities are aimed at creating a warm environment where the students may feel safe to express their opinions, ask and answer questions, may develop constructive relationships in a creative and active process of learning, stimulating the ability to negotiate and to feel empathy for the others, and may also have fun. A friendly environment is really important for effective learning. As Kristina Wright states: “Contrary to popular belief that learning gets serious after high school, the college classroom *can* be a place for fun and games. An atmosphere of playfulness may work wonders not only for creating community and building student engagement, but also for fostering learning outcomes.”¹² Actually, a number of colleagues were positively impressed by this experience, by our colourful classroom, and observed that students were always smiling after English classes, so much so that someone expressed the willingness to collaborate for the next academic year.

In this kind of activities students are not seated in their desks, but move around the classroom, gathering near the teacher’s desk or wherever they find useful space. As we have the possibility to use a classroom dedicated to this course of study, where the chairs are not fixed to the floor, usually we arrange the chairs in a circle or in other ways, according to the requirement of the activity. Moreover, the classroom is made more welcoming and colourful by the posters and other products, which the students hang on the walls. A

¹²K. Wright, “Playing Games Can Yield Serious Learning” May 20th 2016, in Faculty Focus, www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/playing-games-can-yield-serious-learning. [22/12/2016]

fundamental aspect in this experience of flipped classroom, in fact, is the creation of artifacts, or products that the students make in groups to process the knowledge acquired in a creative way. These artifacts enable the students to understand more deeply the concepts under study while they are engaged in planning and creating posters, drawings, newspaper pages, conceptual maps, videos, slides and other podcast, which illustrate the content of the lessons in a creative way. These artifacts are successively posted on the platform or hung on the walls depending on their nature. Generally speaking, the students are very proud of their works and willing to share and discuss them with the whole class, in an atmosphere of positive competition.

By using digital technologies together with other educational resources, through a wide range of activities performed with non-formal educational strategies, the students are able to learn better and more in depth, since these strategies involve multiple sensory stimuli that provide the motivation to pay more attention to the information and to memorise it in an effective and lasting manner. Another advantage of using a multimedia approach to teaching is that when the students create their products as a team, they learn to work cooperatively, one of the competences required by our society.

Therefore, involving the students in group activities can positively affect learning outcomes. A number of studies show that students tend to learn more when working together than when they do it alone.¹³ When students are engaged in teamwork, they tend to support each other and to think critically, since the answer to question or the solution to a problem are not provided by a book or by the teacher, but they have to find them on their own.

Research on the strategies of learning by doing shows the efficacy of these innovative approaches in improving learning and the results achieved by the students. Active learning is related to better academic performance and enhanced commitment, involvement, as well as the use of critical thinking and positive attitudes towards learning.

2.2 Lessons by students

Once a week, students have the task to present a lesson planned for primary school children, within the framework of a teaching unit. They do so by bringing to class a synthetic lesson plan, all the teaching material, tools and resources they intend to use, such as realia, posters, pencils, felt pens, scissors, scotch tape, and so on. The lessons should involve games, songs, storytelling and a variety of practical activities, as well as the use of an Interactive Whiteboard and its application to CLIL. In other words, they exploit all the activities,

¹³Michael, J. (2006). "Where's the evidence that active learning works?", in *Advanced Physiology Education*, 30, 159-167.

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strategies and resources we employ during classes, although adapted for young learners. These activities, in fact, can be used with learners of all ages. Each lesson is followed by a class discussion aimed at highlighting both its strengths and weaknesses and finding together solutions to improve its effectiveness, or possible extensions, exploitations and follow-ups of the activities.

Sometimes, on one of such occasions, we have noticed that students who have a good competence in English, are not always so good at putting into practice teaching skills, while students who struggle with the language can sometimes be better teachers, showing that linguistic competence alone does not necessarily mean that one is also good at teaching the language. Therefore, during the course, we have students plan their lessons in groups first, so that the more creative ones can stimulate and motivate those who have better competence in English to perform better, and vice versa. Towards the end of the course, students present their lessons individually, and usually, after working in groups and learning from each other, they prove to be more self-confident and creative, therefore better teachers.

Every day, students in turns must also organise their own energizers. For each activity, students are involved with us teachers in a discussion on its didactic and pedagogical aims and a reflection on the theories underlying it, as well as on their feelings about the experience.

3. CLASS DISCUSSION

Class discussion is an effective way to connect the work that the students do individually at home with class activities. The videos, and the other materials that the students have to view before coming to class are accompanied by thought-provoking questions that can have more than one correct answer. Students are required to answer the questions, take notes of key words and concepts, and to write a thought or a question related to the content to propose for class discussion. In the classroom, students discuss the topic, compare their answers and notes for a few minutes, working in pairs so that also the most shy students have the opportunity to express their opinions. After that, the discussion is first extended to the group (5 or 6 students) and then to the whole class so that a number of possible answers and opinions can be exposed. All the students are stimulated to provide their opinions and to support them with examples, to explain their reasoning and identify opposing opinions saying why they disagree. Sometimes we organise class discussion through a “moving debate”, an activity that encourages all the students to think critically about an issue, which can be a question or a statement, and take a stance. Two signs are placed on the floor on opposite sides of the room (e.g., Yes/No, or Agree/Disagree), and the students move to one of the signs according to their

opinion. They are then asked to explain the reasons of their opinion and try to persuade the students standing on the opposite side to change their view on the issue. When this happens, students switch sides, always explaining their motives. In this way all the students take active part in the debate, and even those who are too shy to speak, or do not usually express their opinion in class discussion, are compelled to do so by simply moving to one of the sides.

Class discussion on relevant issues is very important in today's education, since the new generation of students has different characteristics and different needs from the previous ones. Today's students have a strong relationship with their parents who tend to protect and follow closely their educational life. Therefore they need to be encouraged to develop critical thinking, which mostly they lack, and the skills aimed at making decisions autonomously. They can access a great amount of information, yet often they do not possess the tools to discern that information critically. Therefore, the teacher, in his/her role as a facilitator, should help the students to read critically, understand, analyse, synthesise, evaluate and apply the information to real life situations, and class discussion offers the opportunity to develop and practise all these skills. N. Howe and W. Strauss claim that class discussion is superior to the traditional lecture in terms of memorisation with understanding and development of critical thinking.¹⁴

Moreover, spending time in the classroom to clarify and expand the content of videos and other digital material, and actively discussing concepts, allows the teacher to better monitor the students' learning process and to detect possible misconceptions or problems in their reasoning. During a brainstorming on culture, for example, we found out that a few students ignored the semantic range of the word "culture", limiting its meaning to the knowledge a person acquires through education. I believe that in a traditional learning environment such problems could not have been detected. This pedagogical model, where the interaction between teacher and students is constant, allows the teacher to observe and monitor all the students and provides the opportunity to resolve this kind of issues.

After class discussion, the students, working in groups, revise the key words and concepts they have written down at home individually, compare and modify them according to the outcomes of the discussion and draw a concept map synthesising, organising and illustrating the content of the lesson. To perform this task, they have to resort to their creativity and are free to choose the means they prefer: they can draw the map on a poster or they can use specific online software. All the products are successively posted on the platform.

¹⁴ Howe, N., Strauss W., *Millennials Rising: The Next Greatest Generation*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000.

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The use of concept maps, developed by J.D. Novak in 1972, represents an effective educational tool which can be useful both for the teacher who can illustrate even complex concepts in a clear and innovative way, usually after a stage of brainstorming, and for the students, as an alternative to traditional note-taking. A concept map is much more useful and effective than notes as it may contain words, numbers, colours, images, boxes, circles and arrows, which help students to easily visualise concepts and establish connections between them. Moreover, a concept map is by far easier to memorise and review than notes when students prepare for the exams.

Underlying the use of concept maps is the principle of constructivism by which students actively construct meaning, that is to say that learning cannot be conveyed, or 'transferred', to use a phrase by Mazur, but has to be constructed by the mental activity of the learner. The use of concept maps on the part of both teacher and students stimulates creativity, critical thinking and facilitates learning with understanding of concepts.

3.2 Course evaluation and students' perception

At the end of the course, students had to fill in four questionnaires: 1) Self evaluation of cooperative learning; 2) Peer evaluation; 3) Group self evaluation; and 4) Evaluation of course and teachers. The students' answers were definitely positive and self evaluation sincere, honest and coinciding with the evaluation done by us teachers.

No student expressed a negative opinion on the course, even a boy who, according to us, was not so much engaged in the various activities, being shy and introvert by character. His comment was: "I really appreciated the challenge that this course posed, putting myself out there, as I seldom do it owing to my character. [...] The most important aspect was involvement. My teachers were able to remedy my shortcomings [...] they were able to make me recite, sing, play and discuss, something that I'd never done before". Another student, already holder of bachelor and master degrees said: "I've learned more in three hours of this course than in five years of other university courses!", thus proving that the experience with this innovative pedagogical model was effective and successful.

All the students who attended classes passed both grammar test and oral exam. Actually, the data collected during this three years' experience show a remarkable increase in the number of students who succeeded in the final tests, as well as better scores, when compared with the previous years.

One of the strengths of this pedagogical model, in my opinion, lies in the fact that, both in the classroom and online, the teacher can constantly monitor all the students, providing them with the necessary feedback in real time and, at

the same time, assessing their individual learning process and the contribution that every single student makes to group work, thus reducing the burden of the exams either for the teacher, who follows the students' progress during the whole course, and for the students who are engaged in learning all the time, so that it is easier for them to prepare for the exams.

The questionnaires show that students like being engaged and active in the classroom, and are more motivated to learn with understanding. They learn better and more deeply the subjects under study when they are "compelled" to take active part in a variety of activities, rather than when they sit still, listen to the traditional lecture and take notes, thus developing a positive attitude towards the discipline and their learning process. Of course, the teacher plays always a relevant role (planning, implementing and managing the learning environment, constantly evaluating the effectiveness of the activities, or the lack of it, changing or adapting them as the need arises), yet this model is fundamentally centred on the students, on what they do, and their behaviour is fundamental in determining effective learning.

3.3 Final considerations

A student-centred environment, where all the students are responsible for their learning, allows them to be more engaged in the process, even finding it amusing. The time spent in the classroom (2-3 hours) becomes pleasurable, stimulating and rewarding for both teachers and students, although sometimes a bit noisy and chaotic when compared with the silent traditional lecture in a teacher-centred environment. At the end of the course, the students express their disappointment thinking that the experience has reached an end. Actually, time flies by rather quickly for everybody!

One of the satisfactions with this experience is realising that the students communicate in English from the beginning, either in class discussion or online. The time spent in the classroom becomes a way to put the knowledge acquired into practice in an interactive and engaging manner. The different tasks performed in the classroom, or assigned on the platform, the active participation in the forum, the creation of artifacts, see the students engaged in the topics of the course also outside the classroom and in every moment of the day, regardless of the institutional timetable. The teacher who adopts this pedagogical model has to invest a lot of time and effort in planning the course, which is subject to daily changes, in finding and adapting materials, monitoring and correcting the assignments posted on the platform. However, accessing the platform every day and seeing the students' products, the seriousness with which they tackle the topics, their commitment in doing the tasks assigned, can be really exciting and rewarding.

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The interaction student-student and student-teacher, the active participation in the activities, become for the students an opportunity to think critically, reflect, process knowledge in a personal and creative way, thus memorising what they learn beyond the immediate objective of passing the exam. Therefore, it surely represents a more effective and advantageous learning.

Although in my previous teaching experience I had always used a content and language integrated learning approach, trying to vary the class activities so as to provide stimuli that could be adequate to the different levels of interest and competences, I found it difficult to help every single student achieve the objectives of the course, or to find the time required to provide for every individual need, as well as to constantly monitor the progress of the whole class. By adopting the innovative approach of the flipped classroom, I realised that it concretely allowed to put into practice personalised teaching and learning, thus offering a variety of presentations and activities which could meet the different learning expectations, styles and paces a class always presents.

Foreign language learning becomes more effective thanks to the immersion in the language through the videos, the constant interaction, the active participation in a stimulating environment, which are essential features of the flipped classroom, and which contribute to increase the students' level of satisfaction.

Finally, I am sure that the flipped classroom enables a shift in the priorities of teaching: from completing the programme planned through traditional lectures to working together with the students so that they can achieve mastery of English, knowledge of academic content, as well as the acquisition of a number of skills and competences to enter today's workplace.

Obviously, the role of the teacher is *a sine qua non* for a good outcome of the flipped classroom. The teacher who decides to adopt this model must be flexible, versatile, must step down from the role of centre stage and become a facilitator, a tutor and a guide to learning, rather than a purveyor of knowledge!

This paper describes a teaching experience with innovative methodologies conducted over a period of only three academic years. Therefore, although the experience was quite successful, I am fully aware that my study has some limitations. Besides the short period of time, three groups of students do not represent an adequate sampling for the application of the model. A more systematic analysis and evaluation of the pedagogical model on a larger population of students in different settings and over a longer period of time would be desirable to provide evidence of the effectiveness and feasibility of the model itself.

Moreover, the model requires on-going evaluation to assess what works and what doesn't, which activity is appropriate and which is not. It is never

a “carbon copy” of the previous year; rather, it is always a work in progress, because it is constantly being modified to suit the need of the different groups of students. After all, the process of using innovation in any field usually gives rise to a lot of questions that need to be investigated through further research.

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.

(Martin Luther King Jr.)

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