

# IS IT POSSIBLE TO TEACH HISTORY IN ENGLISH TO STUDENTS WITH A LIMITED COMMAND OF THE LANGUAGE?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education) is a four-year education period for 12 to 16 year-old-students. After obtaining the ESO certificate, students can opt for vocational studies or taking a two-year course, *Bachillerato*, that will enable them to opt for the University Entrance Test. Throughout ESO students in standard schools progress from an elementary to a lower-intermediate level after about 400 hours of exposure to the language. Many teachers wonder whether CLIL programmes are a feasible idea with this type of target students, or rather they are naturally restricted to a) elite schools or b) selected students, which have previously shown a high command of the target language.

In 1998 a team of teachers of English in the state secondary school IES Lluís de Requesens in Molins de Rei (Barcelona) planned and started to implement an optional three-month CLIL History course with the aim of researching whether such an approach was a feasible one in the particular context of that school.

## 2. PLANNING THE COURSE

The first step in the planning consisted in trying to answer a few fundamental questions:

**Which subject and what kind of teacher?** One could start trying to answer this question with a theoretical perspective: is there any particular subject which is more appropriate than others in a CLIL classroom? Science or business, could be argued, are strong candidates to be taught in English, as in both cases experts in these areas use English as a lingua-franca among them, while other subjects hold other merits. In our case reality struck us: although the idea of CLIL sounded nice to many members of the staff, It soon became apparent that for the moment there were not any content teachers

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willing to embark in the project. The main reason teachers put forward was that they felt not confident enough in their linguistic skills to face such a commitment. Some colleagues also reported that they thought that the extra-effort that any kind of innovation projects brings about is not sufficiently appreciated by the educational authorities or by society. Therefore, it became clear that the English teachers would be the ones who would take responsibility for planning and teaching a non-linguistic subject. As English teachers, we didn't think that this was the ideal situation. We strongly believe that content lessons should be planned and taught by teachers with a profound knowledge of the subject. Foreign language teachers can be of a great help trying to foresee the linguistic problems students might come across and help planning tasks, which support learner's comprehension and production activities. However, we thought that, under the circumstances, it was worth to open a new path, which could be continued, eventually, by other colleagues.

Thus, we had to look to ourselves and see which subjects we felt capable of tackling with a certain guarantee of success. Social studies won the race. To decide on the topic was easy: it had been repeatedly observed that many students in the school finished their compulsory studies at the age of 16 with a very poor knowledge of recent determining historical facts, essential to be able to understand today's world. The Social Studies Department agreed that offering an optional subject on the History of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 15-16 year-olds was appropriate and worthwhile. It was clear that the collaboration of the Social Studies Department would be needed throughout the planning period in order to guarantee the scientific rigour of contents and materials<sup>2</sup>. We also predicted that the topics that would come up throughout the course would naturally lead to using the language with a great variety of purposes.

**Which age group?** Fourth ESO was chosen for being when students reach their highest level of proficiency in the target language within the stage of compulsory education.

**What criteria are to be used to allocate students to this credit?** Again, we could now start arguing about the convenience or not of organising some kind of selection process in the interests of obtaining best results. However, this kind of discussion was pointless in our case, as the students we were going to get every time the credit was offered would

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Dr Cèlia Cañellas her expert advice on this commitment.

depend largely on the other credits offered within the same time-band. Experience confirmed this prediction. Thus, for example, when the CLIL course is situated competing with French as a second foreign language, the group tends to be made up by students with little interest in foreign languages. While, when it competes with L1 reinforcement credits, it tends to be formed by students who possess more consolidated language skills. On other occasions, groups are formed by students with a variety of interests and abilities. What must be pointed out is that in this context “optional” means that not all the students in the school take the course. It doesn’t mean that the students have opted for it.

A new, more precise question naturally emerged from this fact: are CLIL courses a feasible option also with students with poor academic results?

**Could we teach History in a foreign language in the same way that it is usually taught when the language of instruction is the L1?** We were convinced from the very beginning that the answer to this question was a categorical “NO”: important adjustments were needed to adapt the methodology to the students’ limited command of English, as well as trying present the credit in such a way that the students would eagerly accept the challenge (Pérez and Escobar, 2002). These adjustments would be addressed at:

1. Helping students understand a variety of simplified and authentic texts with historical content.
2. Helping students understand the teacher’s explanations in the target language.
3. Enabling students to use the target language confidently in small group work and in class discussions.
4. Providing guidance on how to use the target language for academic purposes or CALP<sup>3</sup> (Crandall, 1987), more precisely in the domain of Social Sciences. This would include skills such as searching, selecting, relating and organising information, describing, comparing, defining, explaining, evaluating, concluding and presenting their work in the form of written assignments or oral presentations (Benejam and Quinquer, 2000.)

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<sup>3</sup> CALP is an acronym which stands for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

With all these ideas in mind we started to look for materials, plan the credit, implement and evaluate it, which, in turn, lead us to re-plan, etc., on an circular action-research procedure, which has not finished yet. We shall now proceed to illustrate the outcomes of this work. First, the reader will find an outline of the general structure of the credit and a brief account of one of the topic units, which we hope, will suffice to illustrate the outcomes of the planning. This section is followed by a brief summary of the evaluation of the implementation of the course with different groups of students.

### **3.COMPONENTS OF A HISTORY OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY**

The resulting credit consists of the following components:

#### **3.1 Lead-in unit**

After a brief presentation of the course and the usual you-can-do-it talk, students are invited to brainstorm as many 20<sup>th</sup> century historical events as they can recall. Next they are asked to classify them into a two-entry table according to the category the event belongs to (culture, society, politics, economy); and the decade in which it took place. This activity serves a number of purposes: a) when students find out that they already know a great deal of things they gain confidence in their possibilities to succeed, b) the teacher has the opportunity to get a rough idea of the characteristics of the students' previous knowledge in History and their linguistic abilities, and c) the grid will serve as a record card and study guide that will be completed throughout the course with new facts. This introduction takes up an average of two 60' sessions.

#### **3.2 Topic units**

From then on, an important part of the remaining sessions (about 20 sessions) will be devoted to the discussion of a few determining historical events covering the whole century. The texts and tasks dealing with each historical event are organised in topic units. Each of these units provides work from one to four 60' sessions and contains the following ingredients:

- a) **Initiation Tasks:** At the beginning of every topic unit, students are asked to read one or more texts concerning an important historical event which took place during the

20th Century and carry out different kinds of comprehension tasks ranging from literal comprehension to interpretation. The bank of texts covers stories that naturally lead to the discussion of major issues. Examples of such texts as the story of a suffragette (the fight of women for their civil rights); The arrival of immigrants to Ellis Island (migrations). Gandhi's disobedience campaign (the end of the colonial empires); the bombing of Gernika (the effects of war on Civilians) Mrs Rose Parks's story (fight for civil rights); the Berlin Wall (the end of the cold war). Alternatively, written texts are substituted by visual materials, i.e. photos showing the effects of the Second World War on civilians; diagrams comparing Capitalism vs. Socialism, maps showing the two blocks during the cold war or films with a historical background.

- b) Debate: initiation tasks are followed by group work where students exchange information, discuss their ideas and come to conclusions. Different task types are designed to elicit the discussion: classifying activities, jigsaw speaking, role-plays, poster-design, etc. Small group work naturally leads to in-depth discussions and teacher's mini-lectures.
- c) Increasing knowledge: very often during the discussion new questions emerge. The teacher takes advantage of this and provides further explanations on the topic (mini-lectures) helping the students to establish links with other events. Alternatively, she presents new reading texts that may help to answer the questions posed by the students.

At the moment, the bank of texts and tasks covers up to fifteen different topics (table 1) and the bank grows larger every year thanks to the contribution of the teachers who become engaged in the project<sup>4</sup>. Obviously, there is not enough time to cover all these topics, texts and tasks in one single term. The selection of which materials are finally used with every particular class depends largely on the reaction of the students towards the topics presented for debate.

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<sup>4</sup> We are grateful to Mónica Bernabeu, Griselda Grau, Montse Plaià, Anna Santacana and Maria José Villafaina for their contribution to the design of some of the materials for the project, its implementation and evaluation.

STORY	LEADING TO TALK ABOUT ...
1. Two young suffragettes go to prison for demanding the vote (1905). Vote campaign martyr (1913).	The fight for women's civil rights.
2. The arrival of immigrants at Ellis Island (1907).	Immigration.
3. The fall and death of Russia's Tsar (1905-1918). The death of Rasputin (1916).	The Russian Revolution.
4. The prohibition of alcohol (1920).	Puritanism. Anticipating the advantages and disadvantages of prohibition. Real consequences of prohibition.
5. The boom of the 1920's and the Wall Street Crash (1920-1929).	Interpreting graphs. The Stock Exchange. Economic cycles.
6. Hitler and Nazism (1918-1933). Anna Frank's story.	Relationship between economy and politics. Nazism. Hitler takes and retains power. The holocaust.
7. The bombing of Gernika. Civilians in the Second World War. (1936-1945).	How wars affect civilians.
8. The Cold War (1950-1980).	Contrast between socialist and capitalist countries.
9. Gandhi's disobedience campaign (1969).	The end of the colonial empires.
10. The Story of Mrs Rosa Parks (1955). Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and liberation. (1964-1990).	Racism and the fight for civil rights.
11. Apollo men walk on moon (1969).	Scientific and technological development.
12. France's student rebellion and Woodstock (1968-1969).	The youth movement.
13. Bay of Pigs invasion. Napalm bombing in Vietnam. The Irangate. (1961-1987)	Historical reasons for the American interventions during the 60s and 70s.
14. Berlin Wall falls (1989).	The end of communism. Changes in the ex-communist countries on their way to democracy and market economy.
15. No man's land (1999).	The Balkans War.

### **3.3 Research project:**

In parallel to the reading and oral tasks, students organised in pairs or small groups of *experts*, carry out a research project on one particular period of time —usually a decade— in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The *experts* collect information about period assigned using different sources such as books, special software and the Internet. By the end of the term each team will have produced a written report which must include the following sections: index; introduction; time-line of the most relevant events in the decade; brief account of three or four important of those events, showing the relationship among them; biography of one important character; conclusion (annex 1) and references. Eventually, the project is presented orally to the class. Also, as a means to self-assess the effectiveness of their presentation and to ensure the attention of their fellow students, each group is asked to prepare a short quiz to be completed by their classmates while the presentation is taking place. The whole century is covered by the work of the different teams. This part takes up about 13 sessions.

#### **3.3.1 Assessment**

So far, teachers have adopted the decision of not setting any formal kind of pen-and-paper test. The teacher's on-going observations of throughout the course and the informal and semi-formal interviews with the students provide her with valuable information which she uses to adapt the programme to each particular group and to suggest new topics for class work. These observations are also the basis for one important part of the final mark.

At the end of the term students' outcomes are assessed through the written version of the research project, the oral presentation and the quiz prepared for their fellow students. The quality of these products contribute largely to the final mark. In them, the language mistakes that do not hinder comprehension are pointed out, but do not affect the mark. The content of the project, the organisation of the information and the ability to present it in an attractive way to an audience are favoured over total grammatical accuracy.

At the moment we are experimenting with new formats adapted to different students, such as asking the more able students to write an essay at the end of the term showing their perception of the changes that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or preparing a multiple choice test on historical facts for students who are less skilled in writing. We hope to be able to present results soon.

#### **4.ONE TOPIC UNIT: FROM MRS ROSA PARKS<sup>1</sup>' S INCIDENT ON THE ALABAMA BUS TO A LECTURE ON RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS.**

In *A History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, different stories give rise to different task types, being variety one important characteristic of the materials produced. What follows is just but one example of the approach followed in the credit.

Mrs Parks story was selected to trigger the discussion on racism and the fight for human rights, which has been so determining in the second part of the century. From all the texts we found on the topic we opted for the text by Granger and King, 1990 (annex 2)<sup>5</sup>, as it satisfied the requirements of highlighting the absurdity<sup>6</sup> of the situation and being roughly appropriate in linguistic terms.

Work begins with the reading of the text, which is immediately followed by small group and class discussion in order to discover an explanation for an apparently inexplicable episode. The identification of racist regulations<sup>7</sup> usually shocks students and sparks off a lively discussion where learners express their ideas and ask questions about racism. When the discussion starts to fade out, students, in groups of three, are invited to role-play<sup>8</sup> the Alabama bus incident, using the guidelines provided in the handout (annex 3).

After the public performance of the groups, students are encouraged to guess how the story ended, which, in turn, gives rise to a brief lecture on racism: using the blackboard as visual support, the teacher explains different landmarks in the fight for equal rights in the last fifty years, while learners take down notes. As a summary of the mini-lecture, students are encouraged to reconstruct a timeline of the landmarks in the USA civil rights movement. If students show an interest in learning more about the subject other texts on the same topic are available in the bank of texts, such as Luther King's "I have a dream" speech or Nelson Mandela's story of imprisonment and liberation. Finally students are asked to establish links with other situations where racial prejudices —anti-Semitism, for

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<sup>5</sup> We thank Heinemman English Language Teaching for their kind permission to reproduce copyright material.

<sup>6</sup> The text deliberately omits that Mrs Parks is not allowed to use the bus seat because of the colour of her skin.

<sup>7</sup> Seats at the front of buses were reserved for whites.

<sup>8</sup> Needless to say that the aim of this activity is not to teach students to use racist insults but to highlight how outrageous the situation is.

example— have lead to discriminating laws, and to consider the increasing racist attitudes that have emerged in our country in the last few years. The whole process takes up about three to four 60' sessions.

## **5. RESULTS**

a) Students with satisfactory results in the majority of subjects, including English:

The first reaction all students have is one of shock and disbelief, as they cannot see themselves doing another subject in a foreign language. Initially, and since it is usually an optional credit, they would prefer changing to another credit. However, once the shock is over and especially after they realise they will not have to pass any conventional exam, students relax and decide to enjoy the lessons. It is a new experience for them to learn just for the pleasure of finding out more, without any pressure of future exams.

After the first two lessons, where their knowledge of the most relevant facts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is tested, students become interested in learning more about recent history and start discovering amazing facts they did not know. They discover, for example, that less than 60 years ago black people in some southern States of the USA had specially-reserved places to sit and eat, and were not allowed inside many restaurants and sport centres. As a consequence, they want to know more about the subject and are motivated to start a research project.

During the research their reading skills improve enormously since it is almost certainly the first time they have to select information from texts in unabridged English. They also develop their writing skills and learn how to use their high command of the language to express their ideas and analyse historical facts, drawing conclusions from them.

Their speaking skills also improve, and they become more confident when they speak and present facts in front of the whole class. They eagerly accept the possibility of teaching their classmates and assessing them, and learn from the process.

In short, results from academically successful students are very satisfactory because they discover there are many things they didn't know about English. This is a new challenge for them and provides satisfaction for the teacher who usually regrets not being able to teach them more in traditional English classrooms with mixed-ability students.

b) Students who consistently fail a large number of subjects or have very poor results in English:

Students with poor results in English start this credit rather horrified at the idea of having to learn a subject they don't like in a language they don't understand. However, once they see there are no exams and realise they will do most of the initial work carefully guided by the teacher, they relax a little. These students require a lot of support from the teacher and grow tired of topics easily, so the teacher has to deal with topics briefly and sometimes let them choose the ones they find motivating. Their research projects are short and poorer in content and language, and they often use the copy-and-paste facility instead of summarising the ideas. They are unable to memorise their oral presentations, so they half-read them.

However, looking at the results from a wider perspective and after asking these students opinions at the end of the credit, some ideas can be drawn. First of all, students appreciate the fact that they are not treated as second-class students. They also enjoy having the opportunity to choose among the topics they find more interesting, and deciding which decade they will explore. They realise using ICT to find information is not difficult even if it is in a foreign language, and they get more and more motivated and committed when they see their progress. Furthermore, they learn basic facts of recent History and realise they are essential to understand today's world. They show an interest in these facts and discover the pleasure of finding out new things without the pressure of exams. They realise that their level of English, especially their passive vocabulary, is much higher than they expected. Since they are successful in English for the first time in their lives, their confidence grows, so they are no longer frightened to use a foreign language to carry out the tasks.

Their reading and listening skills improve enormously. They demonstrate their ability to confront a long text in real English to extract the main ideas, or to follow the general idea of what the teacher says in class. Many academic skills that were taken for granted in 4<sup>th</sup> ESO in L1 subjects are re-taught in this class, so learners are presented with one more opportunity to learn them, in a context where "not-knowing" is acceptable. So students re-learn, for example, to appreciate the difference between economic, social, political and cultural facts; or how to organise and structure an academic essay including index, introduction, body, conclusion and bibliography.

The students find out how to use the Internet and CDROM to obtain the relevant information. Even if they only present work that has been produced using the copy-and-paste facility, teachers find this acceptable as it demonstrates the students' ability to research the topic successfully.

In summary, the students feel rewarded and their motivation and self-esteem increases. Their receptive linguistic skills, academic skills and overall general knowledge improves, and they find themselves interested in historical facts they were unaware of before. Can anyone possibly deny that these results are satisfactory enough for any learner?

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Our findings are based on the limited experience gained in the design, implementation and evaluation of a 35-hour course observed through the teachers' accounts on what happened during the lessons and on the students' comments and productions. Some videotaped lessons were available too. The data confirm that mainstream students benefit enormously from CLIL programmes, helping them to consolidate their communicative skills in the target language and to acquire new skills and knowledge in the content area.

The findings also illustrate that CLIL can be a feasible alternative for students with a record of failure over several subjects including English, provided that their individual needs and abilities are taken into account and the classes are tailored as necessary. Both teachers' and students' reports showed that in these classes students learned more English or History than in conventional English or History classes.

The introduction of CLIL programmes is challenging for both schools and education authorities as it requires a great deal of planning; the teachers must reassess the preconceived ideas they have about language and content learning, and it involves reorganisation of timetabling and staff.

CLIL programmes should, however, be seen as worthwhile as they respond to the need provided by an increasingly multicultural and multilingual world. Further research is required in our country to identify the distinctive features that characterise CLIL as a highly complex learning environment, and to determine the results the programmes have on both students and teachers, and on both the learning and teaching of language and content.

## **SOURCES OF CLASSROOM MATERIALS**

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*Annex 1 Samples of work produced by groups of students.*

POSTER SHOWING SPAIN'S FORMER HEAD OF STATE

FRANCO

good sight which helped him to get the power during the civil war, after General Mola died.

'sweet' voice which determined all of his speeches on TV, in Christmas nights.

his heart, in his left, although it's very strange. During his last years, he suffered some heart attacks.

his sexual relations was not important for him. He never overcome the trauma which he suffered when his father left his mother.

He used his knees to pray.

his right foot which stepped on the train station to talk with his friend Adolf Hitler.



Machavellian brains which helped him to stay 40 years in the government, before King Juan Carlos got the power

his last public smile, in Orihuela plaza, because of the Columbus Day, in 1975.

sensitive stomach to a man who was an enemy of alcohol.

right hand, which signed all death sentences.

## TEXT PRODUCED BY STUDENTS (lo PONEMOS?)

This has been an interesting work. We have learned a lot of things that before we did not know, or we do not know really. However, we think that it's very extensive, because we have had short time and it coincides with exams and another works. We like setting the pattern and to can explain the story how we have wanted.

The Spanish transition is a very interesting and important event in the history and we have found a lot of information and we have had to resume it because if not, this work would be too extensive and we would be very tired, Also, we do not know how to say in English a lot of sentences which we can't looking for in any dictionary.

All the information we wrote is from an old Catalan newspaper because we have not found any interesting articles in Internet or others web sites.

### *Annex 2 Materials*

#### **The Story of Mrs Rosa Parks**

This incident took place in the city of Montgomery, Alabama on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1955.

It was the early evening rush hour in Montgomery. Mrs Rosa Parks had just finished work for the day and was waiting for the bus at the bus stop. She was going home. When the bus arrived, she got on through the front door and paid for her ticket. Then she quickly stepped off the bus again and went to the back of the bus. This time she got on the bus through the rear door.

Mrs Parks was very tired. She had been working hard all day. So she looked for a free seat, but there were no free seats at the back of the bus. Then, she noticed that there were a few empty seats at the front of the bus. So she went to the front of the bus and sat down. She was very tired and she was happy to have found a place to seat.

At the next stop, some more passengers got on and filled all the empty seats. One man could not find a seat and stood next to Mrs Parks waiting for her to get up for him. Mrs Parks did not move.

The bus driver swore and stopped the bus in the middle of the road. He had been watching Mrs Parks and the man in his rear mirror and was very angry. He got up, walked to Mrs Parks and ordered her to stand. Mrs Parks quietly but firmly refused. She had been standing all day in the department store where she worked and was very tired. The bus driver swore at her. Mrs Parks did not move and the bus driver called the police. Mrs Parks was still sitting in her seat when two policemen arrived a few minutes later. They ordered her to stand, but she refused. Then the policemen arrested her for breaking the city bus regulations.

(Adapted from Granger and King, 1990<sup>9</sup>)

**Glossary:**

Break the regulations: desobeir la llei  
Department store: grans magatzems  
Rear door: porta del darrere  
Rush hour: hora punta  
Seat: seient  
Swear, swore, sworn: insultar fent servir dir paraulotes

Annex 3: Instructions for role-play.

***Role-play: in groups of three act out the racist incident in which Mrs Rosa Parks was involved. The following guidelines may help you.***

Bus driver: Ask what is going on. Swear. Very angrily, ask Mrs Parks to stand up.

Mrs Parks: Quietly but firmly refuse to stand.

Bus driver: Ask her again to stand up. Use a racist insult.

Mrs Parks: Refuse again.

Bus driver: Threaten Mrs Parks to call the police.

Mrs Parks: Refuse again.

Bus driver: Call the police.

Policeman: Greet the bus driver. Ask him what's going on.

Bus driver: Explain the situation.

Policeman: Ask Mrs Parks to stand up.

Mrs Parks: Refuse.

Policeman: Threaten Mrs Parks to arrest her.

Mrs Parks: Refuse.

Policeman: Arrest Mrs Parks for breaking the city bus regulations.

***Guess: How do you think the story ended?***

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<sup>9</sup> We thank to Macmillan- Heinemann for permission to use this text.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1956 Mrs Parks, a coloured citizen, was sent to jail when she refused to abandon a seat reserved for whites by the segregating bus regulations in Montgomery. Her imprisonment sparked off a boycott to the city buses and was the beginning of a campaign in favour of the end of segregation supported by Martin Luther King.