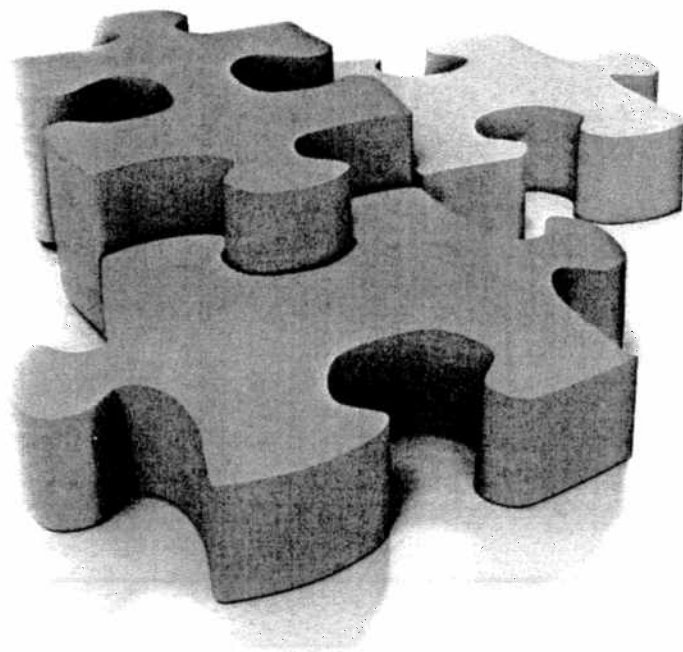


Integrating Language and Content



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TESOL Classroom Practice Series

Building Bridges Between Language and Content in Religious Education

Rosie Tanner and Lorna Dunn

I was used to teaching English *in English*; the challenge seemed to be doubled when I started teaching Religious Education through English. (Lorna)

How can teachers teach a subject “through English” to 12- and 13-year-old beginning-level learners? Lorna has been teaching English for 38 years and Religious Education for 3, and 2 years ago she started teaching in the new bilingual stream at Dr. Moller College, in Waalwijk, a small town in the Netherlands. In addition to Religious Education, she teaches extra English to the new bilingual learners to help them with their fluency. Teaching *in* English, teachers focus on language only, but teaching *through* English means both teaching your subject and being aware that learners are also learning language at the same time.

Lorna’s classes are mixed ability in terms of English proficiency. Students are mostly “false beginners” with a level of English as low as A1 on the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). Their receptive vocabulary is relatively good (they frequently watch television and play computer games in English), but their knowledge of religious concepts related to different religions is next to nothing. In the first few weeks of class, the course book (C. Thomas & Thomas, 2005) covers unfamiliar and abstract ideas such as denomination, community, commitment, and Sikhism. Lorna had this to say about the book:

Simply translating the words into Dutch is not enough for them to get to grips with the concepts. And I had chosen this book and the topic without realizing how difficult it would be for the children! Now I suddenly had to teach unfamiliar and typically British concepts such as the Salvation Army, a church school, a chapel or a carol service, to these near beginners. How could I possibly help them learn about alien concepts in a foreign language as well as motivate them to learn some religious education?

In this chapter, we discuss the context of bilingual education in the Netherlands, describe some ways in which Lorna worked on her problem, and analyze why her actions constituted good content and language integrated learning (CLIL) practice.

CONTEXT

The first bilingual schools in the Netherlands opened in 1989. They were actually bilingual streams within large, comprehensive-style secondary schools. These schools are also known as “CLIL schools,” referring to the approach that they use. Many classes in higher education are already carried out in English, and the ability to function in English globally is seen as important, but CLIL schools have additional status. The number of schools starting a bilingual stream is increasing every year, and out of about 650 secondary schools in the Netherlands, nearly 100 have a bilingual department. To qualify as a junior CLIL school (a school with a bilingual stream), a school must offer at least 50% of lessons in English during the first 3 years, in any subject the school chooses (with the exception of languages other than English itself). Typically, these subjects are mathematics, biology, history, geography, art or drama, and physical education. (The CLIL school qualification must be granted within the first 5 years by the European Platform¹ [Europees Platform, 2008] through inspection visits.)

The school where Lorna works serves more than 1,000 students ranging in age from 12 to 18. The school began its CLIL stream in autumn 2006. In 2008 it had 170 bilingual learners, divided among two first-year classes, three second-year classes, and two third-year classes. School-leaving examinations in Dutch are compulsory, so bilingual schools offer a more limited number of subjects after the third year in English. Many bilingual learners opt to take some Cambridge examinations (First Certificate in English, Cambridge Advanced English, Cambridge Proficiency in English) and the International Baccalaureate A2 examination in English.

The Learners

Learners choose to go to a bilingual school in the Netherlands for various reasons. They like learning languages, and bilingual education is a modern alternative to the traditional grammar schools that emphasize Latin and Greek. For children who have been to international primary schools, it is an opportunity for them to continue learning in English; furthermore, a bilingual school is seen as having an extra challenge for gifted and talented children.

English has a unique place in Dutch culture and trade; much of the media is in

¹The mandate of the European Platform for Dutch education is to increase the quality of education through internationalization.

English, and many people read in English. Dutch people benefit from the mastery of a lingua franca in order to communicate during work and holidays: Bilingual schools organize school visits or exchanges abroad so that pupils' horizons are expanded. Moreover, a high level of English is becoming more of a prerequisite to future career or study success: A growing number of higher education courses are taught partly or purely in English, and many academic textbooks are in English.

The Teachers

Teachers choose to teach in the bilingual stream for a number of reasons: They have links with British or U.S. culture (family, friends, a hobby, work or study experience); they have a good mastery of English; they thrive on new challenges and are open to new ideas, including about (language) learning; some even consider teaching in the bilingual stream to be an easy option because the pupils are mainly bright and interested. Teachers go through an internal selection procedure whereby their English is tested and they discuss their reasons for wanting to work in the bilingual stream. Once chosen, they attend in-service CLIL training courses in the Netherlands or the United Kingdom and are expected to achieve a certain level of English (Cambridge Proficiency Exam within 5 years) in order to teach in the CLIL stream. Beginning CLIL teachers attend English language courses; as they become more used to teaching in English, they take CLIL methodology courses dealing with issues such as self-confidence when teaching in a foreign language, children's language learning, and teaching subject matter while taking language learning into account.

In terms of what she has learned from these CLIL courses, Lorna has the following to say:

Teaching according to CLIL concepts has made me aware of the potential for authentic use of English and language acquisition among learners of roughly 12 years of age. They absorb many structures and words without a great deal of effort. By comparison, I feel that there is a lot of wasted effort in regular classes on rules and tests, which are useful in themselves but are surely only a means to an end. CLIL allows us to work directly towards the goal.

Challenges in Bilingual Education

Lorna's problem is one shared by many subject teachers at bilingual schools in the Netherlands, who are working with near-beginning-level learners of English with course book materials written for native-English-speaking teenagers, usually in a British context. Her challenges are complex:

- She works with a mixed-ability group in terms of English: English is compulsory at primary school, but standards at secondary school entry vary considerably.

- The students are mostly academically strong (they must attain a certain score in their primary school examination to enter the bilingual stream), so they need to be challenged intellectually.
- All the pupils are fluent in Dutch, so they can communicate easily with each other in their native tongue. However, they are not used to communicating—in speaking or writing—in English.
- The brief for Dutch teachers of Religious Education (or *levensbeschouwing*, translated as philosophy of life) is to encourage pupils to reflect on major ethical and personal questions. The abstract concepts needed for reflection are hard to grasp for learners younger than 13 or 14 years old (Evans, 1973), and even more so in a foreign language.
- A major issue in Dutch education is a conflict of ideas between traditional and progressive teachers about whether knowledge or skills should predominate. How can a balance be achieved?
- Many concepts in the course book are culturally specific; a translation often cannot help.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

In this section, we discuss and illustrate some strategies and tasks that worked for Lorna during her first 3 months as a teacher of Religious Education in the bilingual stream and then describe two longer activities that illustrate good CLIL practice.

Building Confidence

In the initial weeks, students in the bilingual stream need to become confident in using English. They are, after all, in an unfamiliar social context with new classmates, with the added difficulty that most lessons are in English. Lorna encouraged confidence by complimenting students who were trying hard to be creative with their English. For example, she encouraged the near-native learners to help with other students' language problems; if a learner was trying but had become stuck, she would stop briefly and ask, "Does someone know the word for . . . ?"

Using the First Language

In order to understand each other, learners and teachers need to do some switching in the beginning between their first language and English. During the first month, Lorna selected some activities from the book to do in Dutch and other, simpler ones to do in English. She asked questions in English, sometimes paraphrasing in Dutch. If students asked questions in Dutch or were stuck on a phrase, she rephrased in English. She encouraged them to speak to her and to

each other in English as much as possible. By the autumn holiday, which occurred after about 8 weeks of English, most of the teaching was in English.

Tolerance of Errors

Accuracy in writing and speaking was definitely not a priority in the first few months. The emphasis was on fluency, on getting students to use the language. In written assignments and tests, Dutch was acceptable if a student wanted to get across a specific idea and could not express it adequately in English. Lorna's ultimate aim was for pupils to get used to putting their thoughts into English as naturally as possible, but at the initial stages it seemed unreasonable to expect pupils to discuss and argue in English, because they shared a common first language. Lorna thus tolerated discussions in Dutch in group work as long as pupils reported back to the whole group in English.

Building Vocabulary

The most important aspect of the first stages of learning was that students needed to learn and use new vocabulary as well as activate their receptive or latent vocabulary in order to communicate. They were not only learning new words related to the subject, but doing so in a foreign language, so emphasis on language at this stage was vital. Lorna's main strategy was to recycle new, important concepts several times through different learning activities so that students used the language in different contexts. The first unit, *Personal Identity*, started with the themes "Who Am I?" and "Where Do I Belong?" in which these new concepts were important: community, experiences, parents, religion, culture, teachers, media, friends, family, customs, practices. Some were easy to learn (family is *familie* in Dutch, and most learners knew the English words *friend* and *teacher*); others took more time.

Lorna used various strategies for building vocabulary:

- Recap the key words at the beginning of each lesson.
- Repeat words initially in context by using short, simple phrases. Learners had some difficulty with the word *community*, so Lorna illustrated the concept with sentences such as "You are all part of a community," "You are all part of the community of Waalwijk," and "At home you are part of the family community."
- Match words to definitions in simple English, and Dutch words to English ones.
- Match words to pictures in the book. This was also a thinking skills activity because the matching was not self-evident and required some cognitive ability. Students needed to think and discuss which picture matched which word, thus repeating the words and deepening their understanding of them.

Personal Idiom File

Each learner in a bilingual stream keeps a personal idiom file (PIF), an individualized vocabulary notebook where the learner keeps a record of new words and their definitions. The term *personal* is perhaps a misnomer because initially words are suggested by the teacher. The PIF helps pupils store important words or concepts and boosts their confidence, because pupils may use their PIF in tests for reference. During the first few weeks of Lorna's class, pupils found it hard to get used to using their PIFs, though these gradually became part of the learning process.

Teaching New Concepts and the PIF

One of Lorna's problems was that concepts occurred in her book that were totally alien to the pupils she taught—concepts such as church schools or the difference between church and chapel—and pupils felt uncomfortable because they did not understand them. She asked them to write “typically British” beside such a term or description in their PIFs, which helped them feel more comfortable about not fully understanding a concept.

Visualization

Visualization helped with retention of words and concepts. Lorna selected a course book that contained many photographs and visual activities, and she often used them to support pupils' learning. Pupils made spider diagrams, or mind maps, to help them activate vocabulary and expand on their own, individual vocabulary (see Figure 1).

Once the learners knew, or half-knew, some important concepts, Lorna introduced the Diamond Nine visual in which a list of nine important vocabulary items is rearranged in order of priority (see Figure 2). It is a cognitively demanding activity that works on vocabulary recycling and thinking skills, but even a less fluent English language learner can carry it out with success. This activity effectively helped learners retain vocabulary more easily.

Good Practice in CLIL 1: Sikhism Storyboard

Sikhism is a well-established and visible faith in the United Kingdom, but it was unfamiliar to Lorna's Dutch learners. After about 8 weeks of bilingual education, Lorna used a storyboard activity to introduce a topic from the course book about joining the Sikh community, or *Khalsa*, by means of the Amrit Ceremony. The unit reinforced the familiar concepts of community, ceremony, commitment, and rules, and included colorful illustrations of the Sikh turban, bracelet, comb, sword, and short pants. Lorna found a simplified version of the story about the founder of Sikhism and the founding ceremony in 1699 in a resource book (Myers, 2001). She read this aloud twice, checking for understanding as she went along. She then split the class into small groups; each group's task was to

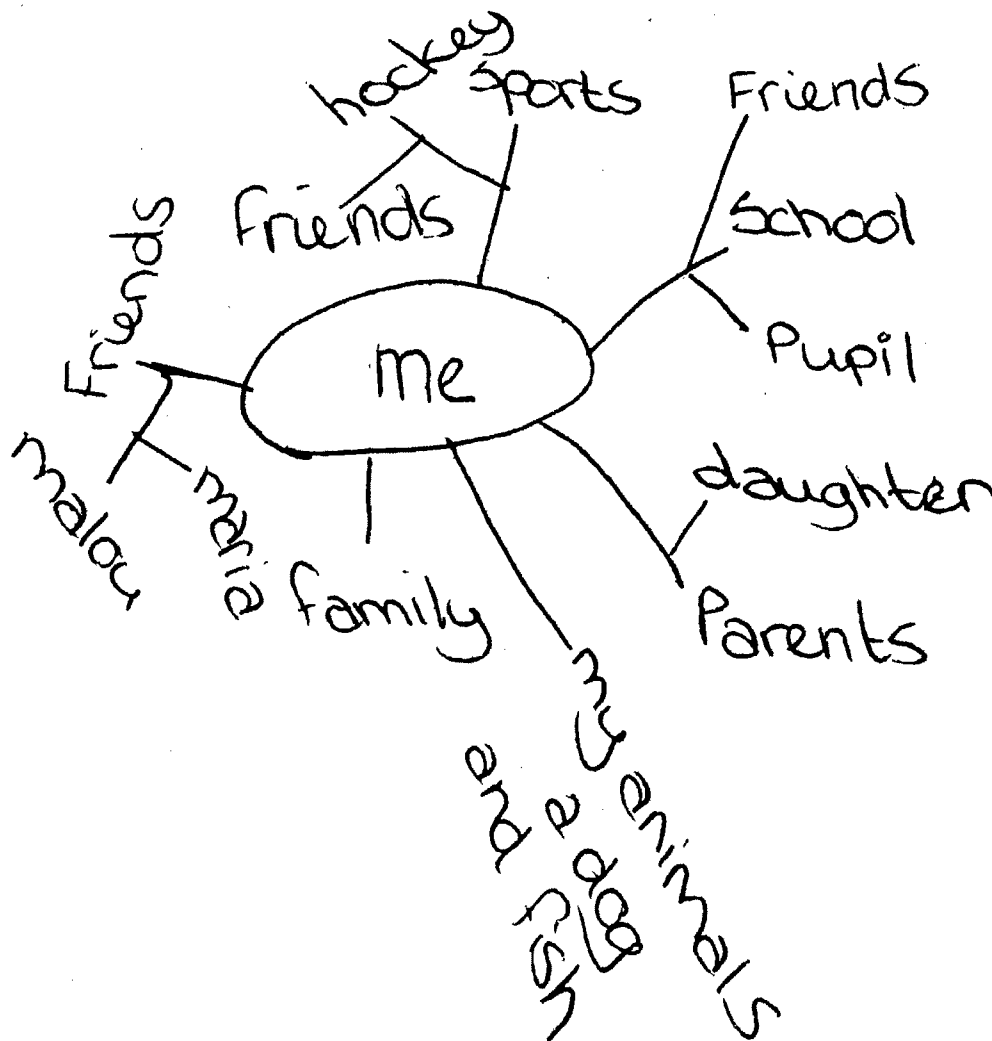


Figure 1. Student-Made Spider Diagram

create a dramatic “freeze frame” of a different scene from the story. These images would later be put together into a storyboard about the ceremony. All the group members had to appear in their tableau and were encouraged to make it visually interesting by means of gesture or height. The activity appealed to the pupils; many quickly improvised props such as paper turbans or swords. Figures 3–5 show the pupils hard at work.

In the next lesson, Lorna provided each group with a copy of their photograph. Their task was now to add a speech bubble for each of the characters in the scene, describing the emotions at that particular time in the story. Each group also wrote two or three sentences describing their scene and its place in the ceremony. This experience of working in a group to build a complete storyboard that reproduced the story proved to be a valuable way of learning and recycling the required concepts and vocabulary. Figure 6 shows the results of this activity.

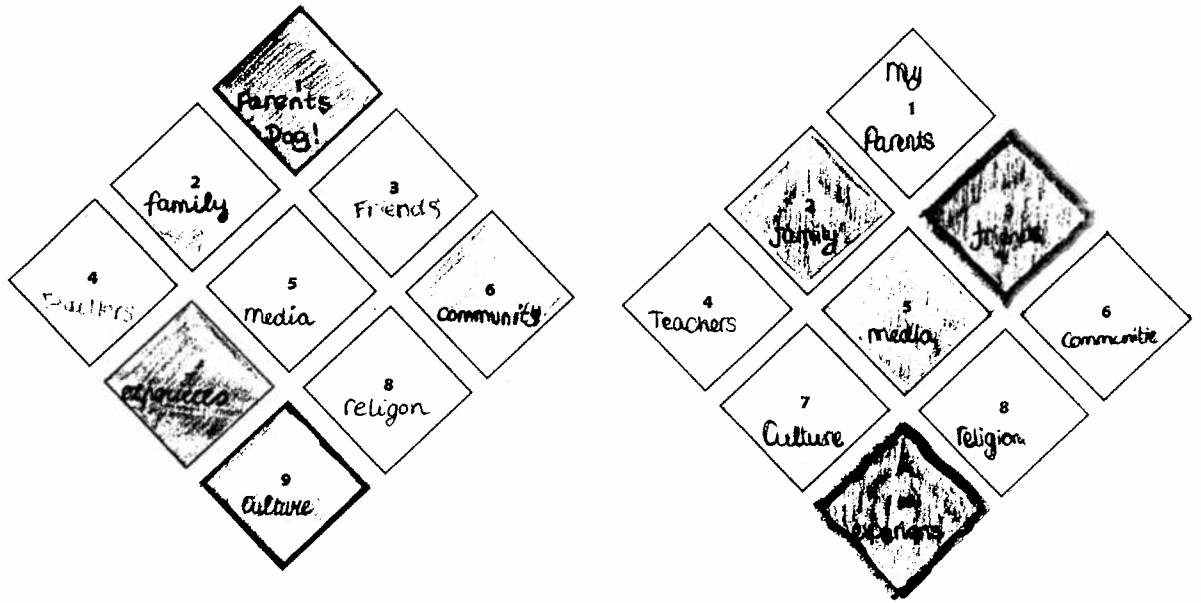


Figure 2. Two Completed Diamond Nines

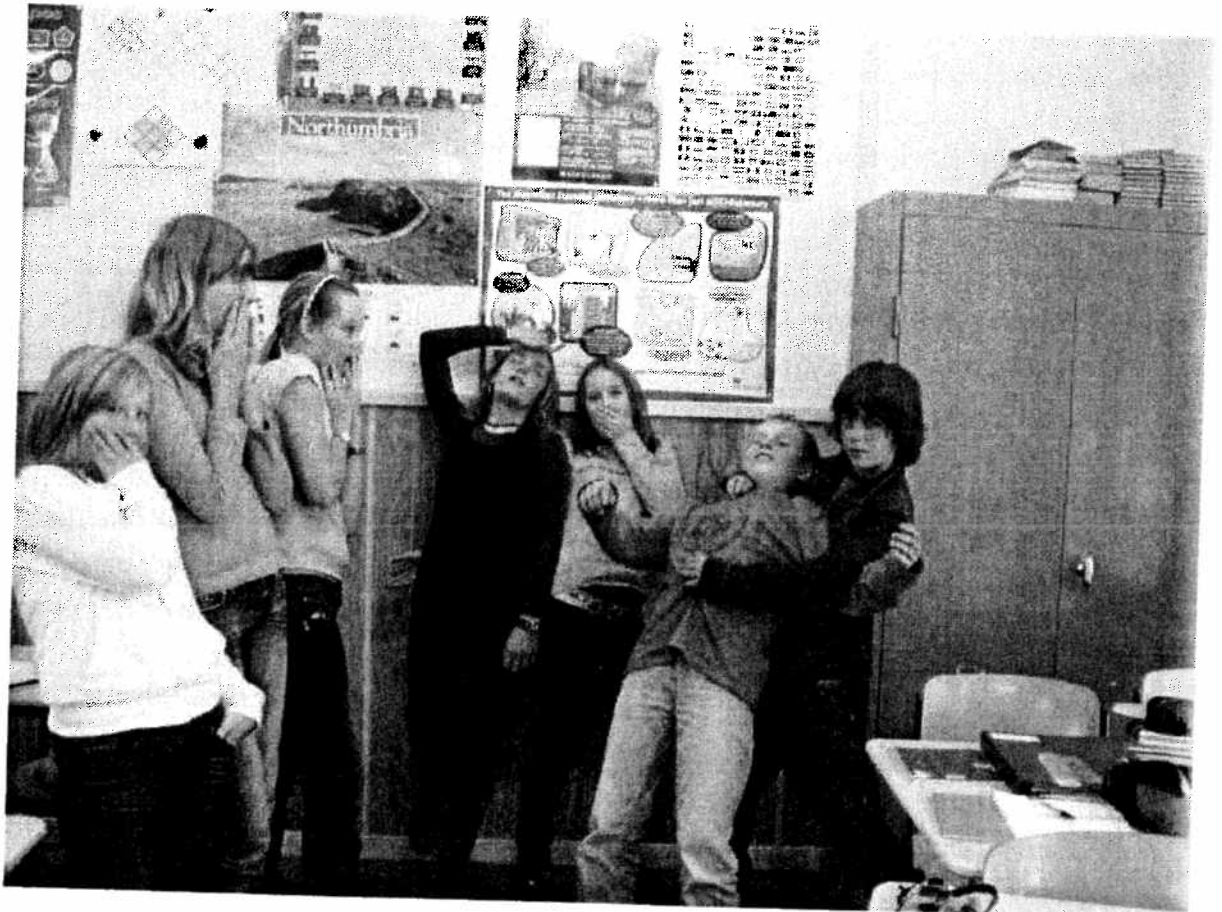


Figure 3. Sikh Ceremony Freeze Frame Depicting the first Amrit Ceremony in the 17th Century



Figure 4. Pupils Preparing for a Freeze Frame by Making and Putting on Props and Headgear

Assessment

The storyboard work was assessed on the basis of effectiveness of the scene (the extent to which each group understood the part of the ceremony depicted in their freeze frame), the involvement of the whole group in the scene (group process), and the dramatic effect (the message). Lorna decided to focus on fluency at this stage. As long as the group was able to get their point across, they had achieved the object. When stuck, they were still allowed to use the occasional Dutch word.

Why Is This Good CLIL Practice?

This series of lessons is a clear example of good CLIL teaching. First, the storyboard tasks served as motivating and authentic communicative language activities. The language and concepts were recycled by using three language skills: listening to the story, talking about the scene and the storyboard, and writing the speech bubbles. Learners used their academic English authentically to refine their understanding of lesson content, interacting in authentic ways to produce a real product (the storyboard) and through the various tasks gradually refined their understanding of the topic in a foreign language.



Figure 5. Sikh Ceremony Freeze Frame Depicting the Miraculous Return of a Volunteer Unharmed

Second, Lorna appealed to learner differences by addressing a variety of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Learners were given the opportunity to take up information in various ways through different channels. They used interpersonal intelligence to do the group work, intrapersonal intelligence in listening to the story, visual-spatial and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences in building up the tableaux and the storyboard, and linguistic intelligence in writing the speech bubbles and in discussions. The more intelligences that are incorporated into CLIL lessons, the more likely that learners will successfully take up the learning opportunities.

Third, learners could use drama to express their understanding of the concepts. This worked well because their productive language skills were as yet inadequate to express their ideas through language alone. Getting the message across through dramatic expression—thus demonstrating their understanding of content—was more important at this stage than flawless language. Filling in a speech bubble and writing a short description of the scene proved to be manageable language writing tasks, especially with the support of a group.

Finally, these lessons are a good example of cooperative learning. Pupils were dependent on each other to succeed (in completing first the scene in the

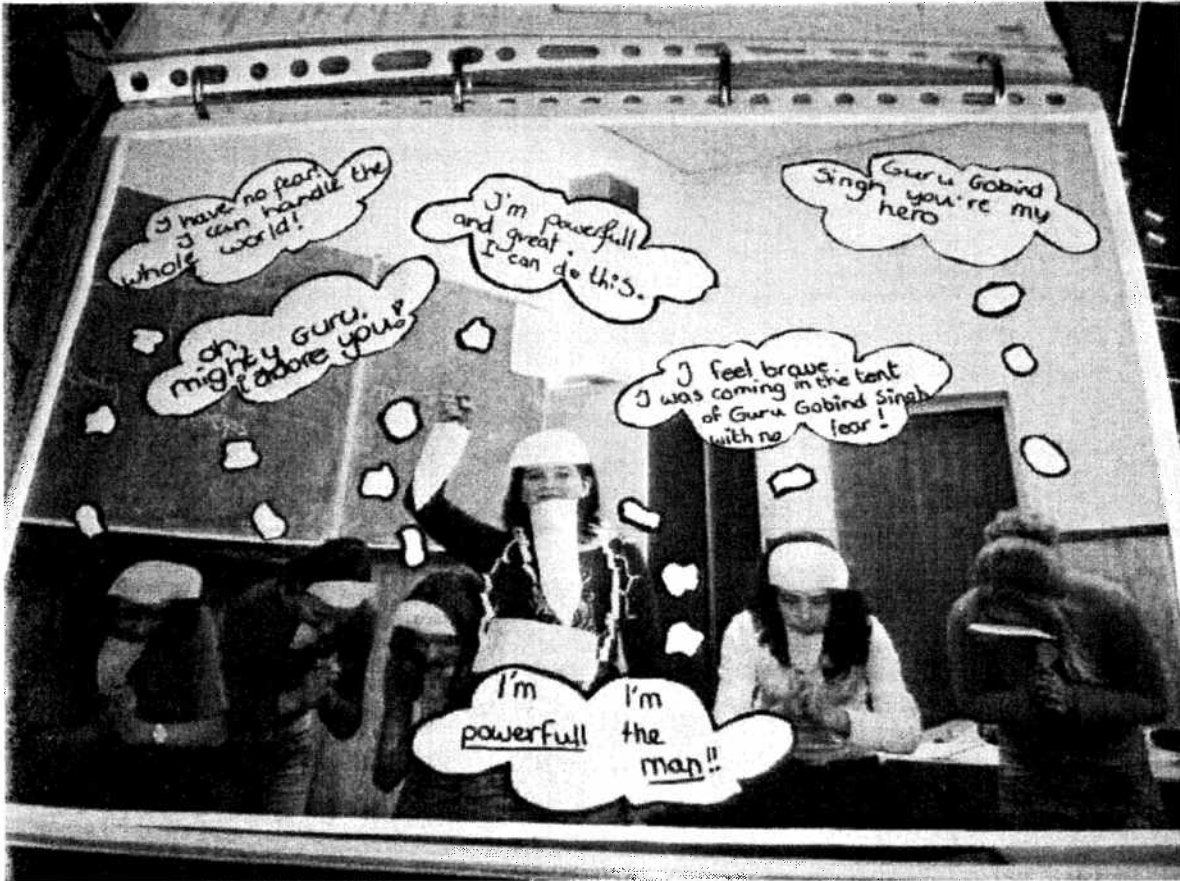


Figure 6. A Sikh Ceremony Storyboard Freeze Frame With Speech Bubbles

photograph and later the storyboard). Without effective scenes, the whole ceremony would have been unclear. Each person had a role in his or her group's scene and in the writing task. Everyone was involved. Learners were assessed as a group, so all needed to participate simultaneously and help each other create an effective scene.

Good Practice in CLIL 2: Hot Seating for Mary Magdalene and Doubting Thomas

When Lorna first tried out the drama activity of "hot seating," it proved over-ambitious and ill timed. Separate groups read three biblical stories. After reading their story, one group member was put into a hot seat to play someone in the story and be questioned by the other group members about their feelings. The activity proved too difficult, both cognitively and linguistically. Learners were not ready for the difficult concepts, the text was too hard for them, and they could not yet produce the language to create questions about emotions. Lorna realized that the task was too complex and decided to scaffold the learning more in order to help learners succeed (Wallace, 2007). She did this in several ways.

Texts and Tasks

First, Lorna selected the two easier texts out of the three suggested in her course book: one about Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus at his tomb (Text A) and one about doubting Thomas (Text B). Both relate to central Christian beliefs. She then formed random groups of four, with half the groups reading Text A and the other half reading Text B, ensuring that more learners had the same material to work on and could support each other. The groups were given a task sheet about their texts to complete, which scaffolded their learning (see Appendix A).

After taking turns to read the passage aloud, group members worked together to write their answers on the task sheet questions about who, when, where, and what, thus checking understanding of the material they had read. They then prepared a number of questions together that they might ask Mary Magdalene or Thomas in person.

Interviews

Next, Lorna formed new groups of four, each containing two pupils who had prepared questions related to Text A and two who had prepared questions for Text B, ensuring that two learners per group had the information for the interview. The groups now received a new task sheet (see Appendix B) that instructed them to read their texts to each other; two members with knowledge of the same story asked questions of each other as if they were the person in the story (i.e., Mary Magdalene or Thomas). In other words: hot seating. The other two group members made note of the questions and answers related to the unfamiliar story. This time, hot seating proved to be a manageable task. By the end of the lesson, learners had read and understood a text, asked questions, and answered them, all while putting themselves in the shoes of one of the characters.

Why Is This Good CLIL Practice?

This series of lessons is another example of good CLIL teaching. First, Lorna again worked on content through several different language skills. Students read a text, communicated with (spoke and listened to) each other about question formulation, spoke during the interviews, and practiced writing on the task sheets.

Second, by concentrating on the two easier texts from the course book, Lorna selected texts that learners could just understand (comprehensible input; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Third, she scaffolded (Vygotsky, 1978) learning effectively by designing special task sheets to help students understand the material. This sort of framework helps language learners grasp texts and concepts. Moreover, the task sheets were clear and written in simple language, the aim of which was to help learners understand the stories, not to develop their English. Ultimately, learners did the reading in a number of easy stages, were assigned tasks to help understanding, and helped each other with comprehension. They focused on answering questions to break

down the text and also formulated questions about the feelings and thoughts of the character involved.

Furthermore, when creating the questions for the interviews, learners discussed both content and language (What shall we ask about? How shall we formulate a question in good English?). Working together to create questions helped them rehearse the language they needed later for an interview and think about concepts they needed to learn.

REFLECTIONS

After approximately 3 months of these lessons, Lorna felt that the pupils were really progressing in English and finally understanding more concepts related to Religious Education. This barely noticeable process developed gradually as a result of immersion in English, as Lorna describes:

Today, the thought occurred to me that the Religious Education lessons are coming together at last. Initially, everything is chaotic, because students are new and have to get used to everything anyway. Sometimes it is hard to know if they are stumped by the English or by the content in the early stages. Today I felt that they were getting used to the English and also to the circumstances.

Through analyzing some of Lorna's first CLIL lessons, we conclude with a number of suggestions for CLIL subject teachers to help learners both understand content and work on language.

- Allow some use of the first language during the first months until learners are more confident in English.
- Gradually introduce English, using paraphrasing or translating into and from the first language when necessary.
- Encourage creativity with the language, and ignore language mistakes. Fluency is more important than accuracy at the beginning stages of learning.
- Select or create colorful materials with a strong visual component.
- Build vocabulary first, and help learners retain vocabulary in a (personal) notebook.
- Recycle vocabulary, using the same words in different activity types. Include a gradually longer time frame between recycling tasks.
- Work with the easier texts and tasks in your course book to help learners understand concepts. Omit overly difficult ones.
- Carry out a variety of activities, and recycle language through different language skills: listening or watching, reading, speaking, and (simple) writing.

- Break down complex tasks into simpler, shorter ones.
- Mix activity types to allow uptake through different learning channels. For example, use a mixture of tasks appealing to different intelligences in order to introduce and recycle concepts and ideas.
- Scaffold learning, for example, through the use of task sheets in simple English to help learners develop understanding of subject concepts.
- Use pair and group work to encourage maximum communication among learners.
- Use drama or photography to help learners understand concepts.
- Implement cooperative learning to include everyone at all stages of learning.

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Lorna Dunn is a teacher who has worked in mainstream education in the Netherlands since 1972. At present, she teaches English and Religious Studies in the bilingual stream at Dr. Moller College, in Waalwijk. Her background is in Scandinavian studies, and she will soon complete an MA in comparative religion at Tilburg University.

APPENDIX A: TASK SHEETS 1 AND 2

Task Sheet 1 (for Text A)

Number yourselves one to four, and read John 20: 11–18. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene.

Take turns reading aloud. Answer the following questions:

Who is it about?

What happens?

When does it happen?

Where are they?

What are Mary Magdalene's feelings in the story, and how do they change?

In your group, think of four questions you could ask Mary if she were here now about what she felt, saw, heard, or thought.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Task Sheet 2 (for Text B)

Number yourselves one to four, and read John 20: 23–29. Jesus and Thomas.

Thomas is sometimes called “doubting Thomas” in English. Do you know why?

Take turns reading your story aloud to each other. Answer the following questions:

Who is it about?

Where are they?

When does it happen?

What happens?

In your group, think of four questions you could ask Thomas about how he felt, what he saw, and what he heard.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

What emotions do you think Thomas was feeling at the time?

APPENDIX B: TASK SHEET 3 (FOR TEXT A OR B) 

You are now in a new group. Student 1 will read the story aloud. Then he or she will ask Student 2 the questions that their group wrote down, and Student 2 will answer. Students 3 and 4 will write down the questions and answers.

Next, Students 3 and 4 will do the same with their text, and Students 1 and 2 will write down those questions and answers.

Story: _____

Questions	Answers
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

Which story do you like best? Why?

Why do you think these are important stories in Christianity?
