The development of academic language proficiency in the CLIL classroom

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This paper will analyse how in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) classrooms teacher modelling, understood as a teaching strategy in which the teacher models the target language, and students’ acquisition of the language needed to talk about the subject matter, are interrelated. The focus is on how teaching in an additional language may boost foreign language learning in general, and more specifically, on how subject-specific terminology, procedures and discourse are made comprehensible and are acquired through interaction in CLIL classrooms.

The design brings together two hitherto unrelated theoretical and methodological frameworks, Usage-Based Linguistics (UBL) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), in order to reflect on whether and how teacher’s oral discourse in the target language in CLIL classrooms links students’ everyday discourse to scientific discourse; models subject-specific discourse for students; scaffolds students’ use and learning of subject-specific discourse; and promotes its effective production by and among students. The UBL framework grounds language acquisition in usage events determined by context, function, genre, and register. The acquisition of academic language is envisioned as an experiential and item-based process from concrete chunks of language to abstract ‘constructions’ which in turn allow for novel instantiations, i.e. the creative construction of discourse. SFL thereby provides a background for the semantic, pragmatic and discourse functions of constructions. These functional characteristics are bound to the register in which they are found.

This paper, then, will discuss the implications for teachers to model those constructions that are constitutive of academic, subject-specific discourse, and the importance for language learners to assimilate proper use of these constructions in order to be effective and successful in the academic discourse.

Keywords: CLIL, Academic language proficiency, Systemic Functional Linguistics.