

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR TEACHER TRAINING: A CASE EXAMPLE ON LANGUAGE, CONTENT AND TECHNOLOGIES IN A LEARNING EVENT BY ETWINNING

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The paper aims at describing an online training initiative (Learning Event) promoted by eTwinning on CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and technologies within an international community of practice. The discussion starts from a brief conceptualization of experiential learning with reference to teacher training for continuous professional development. Self-reflection on the learning outcomes and the added value of the experience in terms of competence development (referred to language, technology and subject content) are key issues.

After explaining the reasons why nowadays it is deemed essential to use technologies for CLIL and language learning, the paper will try to describe the processes of discovering, learning, experimentation and socialization activated in the participants during the training pathway, by mentioning some data from the surveys and by describing some digital contents produced by the teachers.

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Forum and blog interactions will be quoted to give evidence of the added value such training episodes can have to enhance teachers' continuous professional development and personal and professional growth, especially in the framework of the recent Italian "Good Reform" Law.

## 1 Introduction

eTwinning<sup>1</sup> is the Programme promoted by the European Commission fostering collaboration and cooperation among schools from different European countries with the use of technologies. A devoted platform, which offers a lot of working tools and services, allows teachers and students to get in touch and work together on a project through asynchronous or synchronous meetings.

eTwinning multilingual portal allows teachers to share ideas, materials, good practices in order to reach common goals.

eTwinning was launched in 2005 and was successfully integrated in the recent Erasmus+ Programme, the new Programme promoted by the European Commission for 2014-20, after the Life-Long Learning Programme for 2007-2014.

eTwinning European Unit is managed by European Schoolnet (EUN), an international Consortium made up of 31 Ministries of Education, where INDIRE represents the Italian National Support Service.

eTwinning fosters the creation of virtual partnerships among schools from different European countries and activates a wide range of training initiatives both in person and online, aiming at supporting eTwinners' professional development, such as national, regional, European workshops, online eTwinning groups, Learning Events.

Between 2014 and 2016 eTwinning Central Unit delivered a survey to all eTwinners, with the aim to understand the added value of eTwinning on professional development and growth. 6000 participants replied to the survey: the outcomes show that eTwinning training initiatives are considered effective and valuable, in particular face to face seminars (63%), national workshops (58%) and Learning Events (57%) (Kearney & Gras-Velázquez, 2015), (Mangione *et al.*, 2015).

The Learning Events, moderated by an expert, are short online training initiatives (generally 10 days), completely free, focused on different topics, organized with synchronous webinars and asynchronous activities on a particular space of eTwinning portal devoted to the initiative. A community of practice made up of eTwinners and Ambassadors work through collaborative tasks during the length of the Learning Event. The main aim is to foster collaboration, mutual aid and the sharing of ideas, materials and good practices at international level.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.etwinning.net>

From 28<sup>th</sup> September to 9<sup>th</sup> October 2015, the author of this paper, upon kind invitation and in collaboration with Donatella Nucci and Massimiliano D’Innocenzo, from eTwinning National Unit and with the scientific supervision of Rute Baptista from EUN, moderated a Learning Event in Italian titled “CLIL & ICT” on CLIL methodology (Content and Language Integrated Learning) with the use of multimedia and technologies. 165 teachers took part in the initiative, attending both synchronous and asynchronous activities with great enthusiasm.

In this paper the structure, the syllabus and the main outcomes of the Learning Event will be depicted, as an example of Experiential Learning for teachers’ continuous professional development.

## 2 Experiential Learning and teacher training

The concept of “Experiential Learning” has been used in different ways across the years (Jane, 1989): some writers used this term to refer to all of education, others referred to a particular practice or curriculum model. In particular, two main contrasting interpretations can be singled out: as a ‘direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it’ (Borzak, 1981, quoted in Brookfield, 1983) on one hand, and on the other, as ‘education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life’ (Houle, 1980). The first meaning refers to the opportunity given a learner by a training institution to acquire knowledge, develop competences and directly apply them in the relevant settings. The second meaning refers to the informal dimension of learning, which is the reflection upon everyday life experiences.

Weil and McGill (1989) classified Experiential Learning into four ‘villages’:

- “Village One”, concerned particularly with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience
- “Village Two”, focused on experiential learning as a basis for bringing change in the structures... of post-school education
- “Village Three”, emphasizing experiential learning as a basis for group consciousness raising
- “Village Four”, concerned about personal growth and self-awareness.

David Kolb (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1976; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) developed the most established model of Experiential Learning, which starts with an experience (“concrete experience”), followed by reflection (“reflective observation”). The reflection is then integrated into a theory (“abstract conceptualization”) and finally these new hypotheses are applied in new contexts (“active experimentation”). A recurring cycle comes out: the learner discovers



The latest National Teacher Training Plan as a part of the Italian “Good School” Reform (Law 107/2015) introduced teacher training as mandatory, according to some top priorities for 2016-2019, among which language competences play a key role. A new system for documentation and self-reflection will be introduced through an online platform taking the shape of a digital portfolio, where each teacher will be able to collect the main steps of his/her professional development, reflecting on the competences acquired and on the ones, which are still to target.

The case example mentioned here can be placed within this framework, even though carried out in 2015, as it refers to an online training experience promoted by eTwinning, in which the participants were guided to find new tools and resources for teaching, directly experiment what they had found and then reflect on this learning experience from the perspective of their professional growth.

### 3 Language, content and technologies in the Learning Event

The Learning Event was aimed at discussing, developing and experimenting *content, language and technologies integrated learning*.

CLIL methodology is becoming more and more popular in the school curricula of the Member States (Eurydice, 2012), also considering the latest Recommendations from the European Commission (European Commission, 2012). It is a “dual focus” approach aiming at integrating content delivery and language competences, as Marsh (2002), the inventor of the CLIL acronym explains: “CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims”.

It is an innovative methodology, which aims at involving students through active and interactive strategies, laboratories and dynamic activities inspired to TBL (Task Based Learning) (Willis D.&J., 2007) and PBL (Project Based Learning) (Markham, 2011).

Educators, policymakers and parents consider CLIL a strong means to offer children a better preparation for their future life, in which international contacts and mobility will be increasingly more widespread (Dale *et al.*, 2011). A lot of authors (Coyle & Baetens Beardsmore, 2007; deGraaff, Koopman & Westhoff, 2007; Dalton-Paffer, 2011) point out the importance of the international dimension of school curricula for daily life, academic or professional aims: therefore CLIL methodology seems to play a key role in the planning of a school curriculum.

CLIL methodology entails the rethinking and reshaping of both language learning and content delivery. As for the language dimension in a CLIL lesson, certain language aspects can be developed more than others (Dalton-Puffer,

2007), in particular:

- “receptive” skills (listening and reading as opposed to the ‘productive’ skills of speaking and writing)
- vocabulary
- morphology (focus on morphemes, the smallest single unit of language with a meaning)
- creativity
- fluency.

CLIL learners can take advantage of larger vocabularies of technical and semi-technical terms and also of general academic language linked to the particular subject studied.

As for content, the concept of what constitutes content in a CLIL context is much more flexible than the traditional subject from a school curriculum (Coyle *et al.*, 2010): it can be thematic, cross-curricular, interdisciplinary, project-based etc., providing the opportunity to enrich the learning within or beyond the regular curriculum, opting for a content-led or a language-led approach.

As Coonan (2011) pinpoints, “CLIL teaching is not the sum of the characteristics of subject teaching and foreign language teaching put together. It has intrinsic features that require the teacher to rethink normal procedures and to set in place new ones”. In particular, she mentions the “CLIL ‘C’ Complex”, that is the different dimensions which have to be rethought as a part of the CLIL teacher profile, such as: Context, Curriculum, Content, Culture, Cognition, Class, Communication, Conflict and Collaboration, Control, as shown in the figure below (Fig. 2).

A recent Report from the European Commission (2014) strongly recommends the link between CLIL and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), in order to enhance language learning and the delivery of content in a foreign language. This Report allows the other topic of the Learning Event, ICT to be introduced.

In particular the Report refers to three kinds of CLIL, largely spread all over the different European States (Budvytyte-Gudiene & Toleikien, 2008):

- the first kind is ‘immersion’: teaching a country’s other language (e.g. Canada, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Finland and Switzerland) or regional language (Slovenia and United Kingdom)
- the second kind is called ‘submersion’, and relates to the linguistic and cultural integration of migrants (the linguistic minority)
- the third kind is where the target language of bilingual education is a foreign language and the target group is the linguistic majority of a certain country; this kind of CLIL focuses on the relationship among

subject, language and learner.

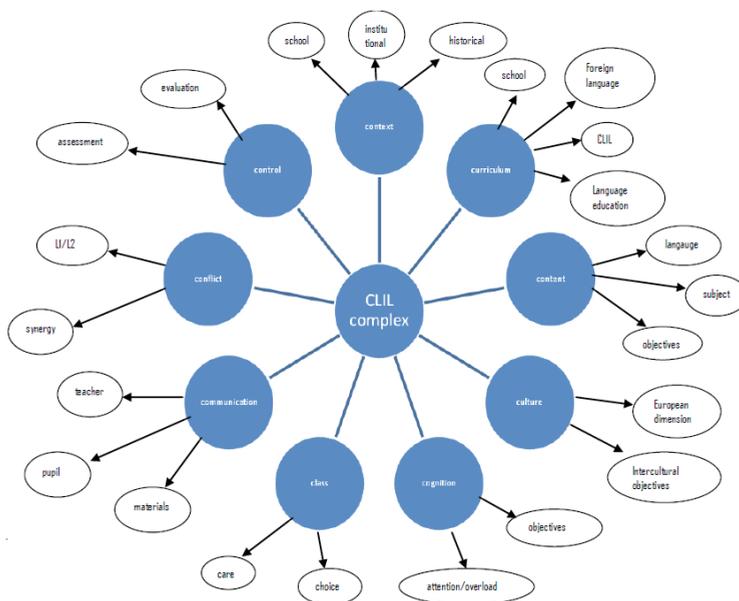


Fig. 2 - CLIL “C Complex” for teachers’ competences (Coonan, 2011)

One change brought about by the new technologies concerns the learner’s mindset: Generation Y (1980-1995) and Generation C (1995-2015) are being constantly exposed to technologies from a very young age (Coyle *et al.*, 2010). 21st century learners, the so-called “screenagers”, are constantly exposed to digital devices and technologies in general, which represent their common way to interact and communicate with friends and with the external world.

That is why school has totally changed after the advent of technologies and teachers need to rethink their teaching strategies taking into account these important changes. This is particularly true in the field of language learning, where the net offers a very wide array of tools, resources, authentic materials, which can help language learning become an effective and meaningful experience. Technologies enable learners to communicate with each other over distance, bringing native speakers into contact with non-native speakers and providing opportunities for developing intercultural understanding (Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2008). As Motteram explains (Motteram, 2013) “the technologies are doing more than simply providing a medium through which teachers can meet the immediate needs of their learners in terms of language

development. They are actually enabling teachers to engage in activity that supports language development in more profound ways than has hitherto been realised". Therefore technologies can allow teachers to provide more easily the necessary engagement with language to improve the learners' competences in ways which were very difficult in the past. It is then necessary to re-conceptualise the role that technologies have played in the classroom in the past.

All these scientific discussions gather around the latest research trends such as CALL (Thomas *et al.*, 2012), TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) (Walker & White, 2013), Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology (Thomas & Reinders, 2013).

In Italy CLIL was introduced as mandatory in upper secondary schools in 2010 (DPR 88/89 dated 2010) and a lot of initiatives and projects have been promoted by the Italian Ministry in order to spread and support this innovation in these years (Langé & Cinganotto, 2014).

The recent "Good School" Reform (Law 107/2015) fosters the implementation of CLIL from primary school up and the National Teacher Training Plan (October 2016) refers to language competences and CLIL as top priorities for 2016-2019.

Considering the framework described above, the Learning Event on CLIL & ICT was planned and delivered by the author in 2015.

#### 4 Profiling the participants

The participants were 165 from different countries (Greece, Romania, Turkey, Serbia), but the majority of them were from Italy, as the graph below shows, detailing the regional distribution (Fig. 3). A specific webtool for geolocalization was suggested (zeemap), which was explored and immediately used by the participants, from a "learning by doing" perspective: the whole initiative was aimed at discovering and directly experimenting new tools and resources for language learning and CLIL.

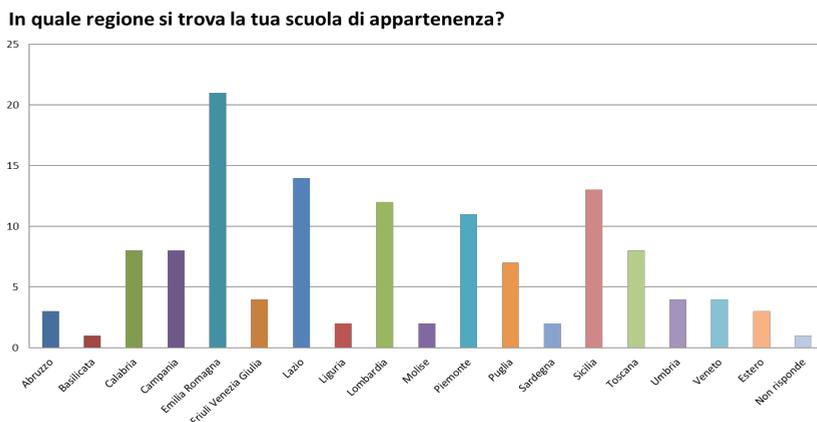


Fig. 3 - The participants' provenience<sup>4</sup>

Another webtool used at the beginning of the Learning Event was *padlet*, which is becoming more and more popular, as it allows you to share posts on a digital board in different formats (text, audio, pictures, video), collecting the comments, emotions and feelings of the participants in a very effective way. It turned out to be a very powerful and attractive ice-breaking activity, as the picture below shows (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - The padlet of the Learning Event

The *padlet* was meant to invite the participants to introduce themselves and write some information about their personal and professional background. At the same time they posted some comments about their learning needs and their

<sup>4</sup> Regional distribution of the Italian participants (from Abruzzo to Veneto); Foreign Country; No answer.

expectations from the initiative.

However, an initial survey was also launched in order to fully understand the background and the needs of the participants and adjust the syllabus accordingly, as far as possible, considering the short length of the initiative (ten days).

The participants were teachers from different school levels, as in the following graph (Fig. 5):

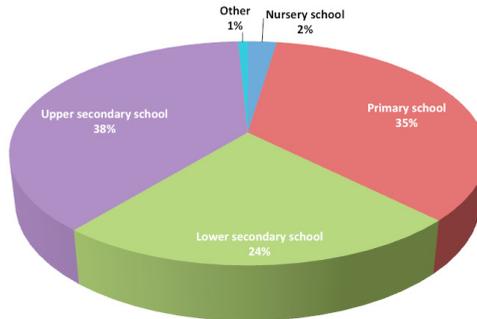


Fig. 5 - School level of the participants

The highest percentage of teachers came from upper secondary school level, but also primary school teachers were well represented (35%).

Below some questions and related answers have been taken from the survey:

*Have you attended previous training initiatives on CLIL? If yes, in which modality?*

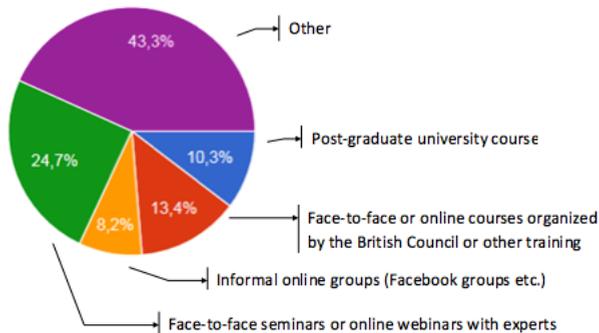


Fig. 6 - Previous CLIL training initiatives

*Have you attended previous training initiatives on learning technologies?  
If yes, in which modality?*

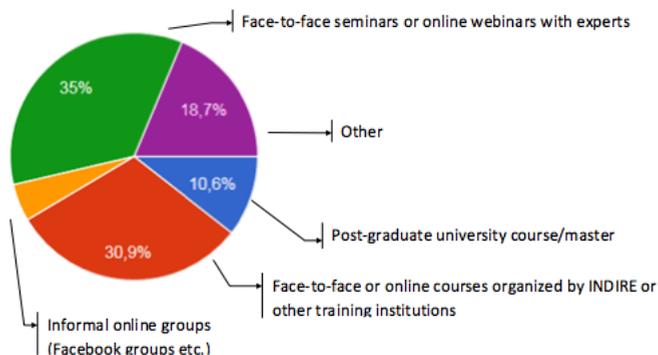


Fig. 7 - Previous training initiatives on learning technologies

The two graphs show the high level of motivation and the solid background of the participants: a lot of them were eTwinning Ambassadors, teacher trainers, experts both in CLIL and in learning technologies: a wonderful community to work with, eliciting discussions and exchanges of ideas, materials and good practices.

*Which competences, in your opinion, does eTwinning help develop? Can you mention some examples?*

This question was aimed at eliciting the participants comments and reactions about the competences developed by taking part in eTwinning projects, in order to try to understand their opinions about the added value of the Programme to their professional development.

- *Methodological, linguistic competences, active citizenship. Comparing good practices.*
- *Collaboration, creativity, technological competences, new teaching techniques, practising English and not only English.*
- *Digital competences, communicative competences, citizenship.*
- *An eTwinning project helps develop transversal skills such as team working and problem solving, especially if the activities are planned and discussed by the students. eTwinning in general helps develop citizenship and digital citizenship, meant as a critical use of ICT. It also helps achieve an intercultural*

- vision of the world.*
- *Cooperation with teachers from other countries helps cross the classroom borders*
  - *Key competences for my students and myself.*
  - *It would be difficult to explain here. In brief we could mention the 8 Key Competences: eTwinning helps develop them in a direct or transversal way. Students understand that subjects are only a means to build knowledge and competences thanks to the cooperation with partners.*
  - *Cooperation.*
  - *Exchanging ideas.*
  - *It elicits curiosity for foreign countries and foreign cultures. For example, a CLIL module on Art focused on local art, could help discover artists, works and values which are completely different and unknown to the students, enhancing the European artistic spirit.*
  - *Learning to learn.*
  - *Entrepreneurship.*

As it is possible to read from the above mentioned comments, the participants believe eTwinning can help develop a wide array of competences, referring to the 8 Key Competences Framework<sup>5</sup>, such as learning to learn, co-working, international cooperation, team working, digital competences, intercultural exchanges etc.

It is clear in all the participants' minds how effective the participation in eTwinning for their professional growth is.

#### *How can eTwinning match CLIL and ICT in your opinion?*

- *A well-structured project can enhance CLIL and ICT.*
- *It can foster the integration of the project within the curriculum and can help develop and assess competences.*
- *I am starting an eTwinning project this year and I will use Twinspace and a virtual class in Edmodo, with a kit I learnt to use through a course attended in Edmodo on digital citizenship.*
- *By focusing on different topics and developing competence-based learning.*
- *eTwinning projects match perfectly with ICT as interactive and integrated cooperation tools. As for CLIL, by using a foreign language as a vehicular tool, everything turns out to be so natural. Anyway I am ready to experiment.*
- *ICT mean overcoming the classroom borders, connecting "isolated" places.*
- *eTwinning projects allow students to get in touch with their peers from other*

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<sup>5</sup> Key Competences Framework: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32006H0962>. Retrieved 2/11/2016.

*countries, arousing curiosity and motivation, especially at lower secondary level. ICT increase motivation and facilitate learning.*

- *ICT are an effective way to enhance CLIL and to overcome the difficulties in L2 that teachers and students meet during the learning activities.*
- *They are the “core” of eTwinning.*

The participants are all aware of the close relationship between CLIL and technologies within eTwinning: it seems to be the natural context in which PBL can get the best of technologies to implement CLIL projects in cooperation with other European schools, giving the curriculum an international dimension. Cooperating with other partners in a foreign language on a common project means giving full meaning to the learning experience and enhancing language learning by making it happen in real-like and meaningful situations.

## 5 The training pathway

The Learning Event, entirely planned and delivered by the author on a specific space on eTwinning portal devoted to the initiative, consisted in the following steps:

- Kick-off webinar
- Learning materials and asynchronous activities in the virtual class
- Wrap-up webinar.

This was the starting question of the research project underlying the Learning Event:

*How can we integrate Language, Content (CLIL) and Technology in our school curricula and in eTwinning projects?*

The educational goals of the Learning Event can be detailed as follows:

- Explaining key concepts, theoretical framework about CLIL in Europe and in Italy
- Offering practical ideas and hints about CLIL (Content and Language Integrating Learning), CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning)
- Disseminating the latest report of the European Commission (2014), as recommended by the Commission itself
- Enhancing the use of technologies and webtools to plan and implement eTwinning projects.

These were the steps of the pathway:

### *Step 1: Kick-off webinar*

This webinar was aimed at introducing the initiative with all the materials, activities and tasks. A first ice-breaking activity among the participants was also carried out.

### *Step 2 (a): CLIL in Europe and in Italy*

Links, materials, resources about the state of the art of CLIL in Europe and in Italy were provided during this phase.

### *Step 2 (b): CLIL & ICT*

The participants were driven hands-on to explore the tools of web 2.0 for language learning and for CLIL to use in innovative learning environments (BYOD, flipped classroom etc.).

### *Step 3: Forum & Blog*

This was the core of the Learning Event, where teachers could actively express themselves, share ideas, materials and practices, post their comments on the different webtools experimented during the initiative. All the materials were collected in a digital repository, which represents a precious inventory of resources for all the teachers potentially interested in these topics.

### *Step 4: Wrap-up webinar*

During the final webinar the teachers were invited to take the floor and present their activities, stressing the added value of the pathway in terms of professional development. The reactions were positive and rewarding

## **6 Outputs**

The main outputs of the Learning Event refer to the process of interaction and exchanges among the participants documented in the blog and forum and the huge amount of digital content and lesson plans produced during the initiative, which have been collected in a specific inventory of the platform. In order to receive the final certificate, the participants were supposed to leave at least one post in the forum and one in the blog and to upload at least one lesson plan or digital content on CLIL and ICT. Surprisingly, they went far beyond this requirement: they interacted actively in the forum and blog and uploaded a huge number of lesson plans and materials, which represent a precious library of resources for the whole community of CLIL teachers and trainers.

In the blog the participants liked sharing their opinions and comments on the various webtools and resources suggested by the moderator or by colleagues or discovered during the Learning Event. The following is a post from the blog, which expresses at the same time the teacher's enthusiasm for participation in

the initiative and the desire to share an example of a project realized with the use of a wide range of webtools.



Fig. 8 - A post in the blog<sup>6</sup>

In the forum the participants posted their comments on their peers' activities and replied to the hints and prompts provided in the different threads by the moderator or by their colleagues. It was interesting to read their enthusiasm and curiosity for a new world they were eager to explore.

The repository of lesson plans is really outstanding: the participants used different webtools and resources to plan their CLIL lessons and they were often able to experiment the activities with their students and provide documentation for that. The lesson plans and digital content on CLIL show the teachers' will to meet these new challenges in a serious but at the same time creative way, as shown in the following example of lesson plan for a primary class in which the teacher uses a wide range of tools according to the different activities and learning aims (lesson plan, tasks for students, glossary, presentation, dialogue).

<sup>6</sup> Cira Serio's project is available at the following link: <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/2360/home>.

Fig. 9 Example of materials for a primary CLIL lesson<sup>7</sup>

## 7 The participants' feedback

The final survey delivered to the participants was aimed at collecting their feedback in terms of satisfaction of their learning needs and expectations. The outcomes were overall positive and rewarding, taking into consideration the mixed abilities and the extremely heterogeneous background of the participants.

The majority of them stated they were somehow enriched by this learning experience.

Below some questions and related answers from the final survey have been reported.

*Which competences do you think this Learning Event may have helped develop?*

A wide range of competences is mentioned here as in the initial survey: language, digital, transversal, social, methodological competences, considering the teaching profession from a holistic point of view as some comments mentioned below can show:

- *I am experienced and competent in CLIL, but I needed a refresher course and*

<sup>7</sup> Susanna Fornari's materials are available here: [popplet.com/app/#/12701142](http://popplet.com/app/#/12701142)

*new inputs. This initiative helped enhance my digital competences and enriched my enthusiasm and passion for CLIL and for eTwinning.*

- *This experience was highly valuable both for CLIL and for ICT. I am happy I will be able to download the material till next December. I want to learn and improve my knowledge and you are all wonderful!*
- *The pathway helped enhance my interest in the field of digital competences and my will to improve my language competences. It was helpful to share the materials among colleagues.*
- *First of all a higher level of awareness of some strengths of CLIL methodology (for example, involving students and making them active thanks to the use of technologies; promoting cooperation among teachers from different subjects; developing planning skills and competences) and a better understanding of possible ways for implementing CLIL (thanks to the help of the colleagues).*

At the end of the survey the following prompt for writing was provided:

*Imagine writing a colleague about your learning experience within this Learning Event.*

This prompt was aimed at eliciting the participants' reflection and meta-cognition on the learning experience in a narrative way, in order to understand if it had helped change something in their teaching style, providing an added value to the teaching practice.

- *This Learning Event was interesting, attracting and highly formative.*
- *At last some theoretical material, with other practical hints to experiment: not only CLIL for its sake, but in reference with ICT.*
- *This is a new brick on my knowledge wall: I feel the building is growing, so "adel@nte"!!*
- *Enjoy CLIL!*
- *The Learning Event provided the opportunity to meet wonderful colleagues with whom I could share experiences, strategies and tools, but also anxiety, doubts and worries. The participants' enthusiasm is contagious as much as their generosity.*
- *I had the opportunity to attend a Learning Event which gave me the opportunity to learn more about CLIL in a dynamic, clear and interactive way, providing a training format that I found unusual and effective.*
- *All you wanted to know about CLIL but never dared to imagine.*

The participants' creativity is outstanding: just consider the final statement: "All you wanted to know about CLIL but never dared to imagine".

The data collected in the final survey were analysed through NVivo<sup>8</sup>, a specific software for qualitative data analysis. The result from the word frequency query produced the following table, which includes the first ten items:

TABLE 1  
Word frequency query from the final survey

Word	Count	English version	Weighted Percentage
CLIL	123	CLIL	1,72%
2015	78	2015	1,09%
eTwinning	44	eTwinning	0,61%
competenze	40	competences	0,56%
didattica	39	didactics	0,54%
metodologia	36	methodology	0,50%
tecnologie	33	technologies	0,46%
collegghi	30	colleagues	0,42%
conoscenza	23	knowledge	0,32%
learning	23	learning	0,32%

Of course the acronym CLIL, the main topic of the initiative is at the top of the query, followed by the year when the event took place (2015). In fourth and fifth places the words “competences” and “didactics” appeared: an interesting signal of how important the teachers consider the development of their competences. “Technologies” is in fifth position: the participants are probably more concerned about CLIL issues than about technological issues. It is interesting to highlight the word “colleagues” in eighth position: the social dimension of the training event is considered essential for the development of competences. The words “knowledge” and “learning” come soon after: the perception of the outcomes of the initiative is positive, as the teachers feel they have enriched their knowledge and reached meaningful and effective learning.

## Conclusion

The paper was aimed at describing an online training initiative (Learning Event) promoted by eTwinning on CLIL and ICT within an international context. A community of practice made up of 165 eTwinning teachers and Ambassadors attended the Learning Event with great enthusiasm and passion. By describing the participants’ interactions in the blog and forum and some examples of digital content and lesson plans produced during the initiative,

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-product>

the paper tried to show the added value of this kind of training pathways to the teachers' professional development, from a self-reflective perspective. The experiential learning promoted by this initiative took place thanks to the use of technologies which helped the teachers discover new webtools and experiment them for language learning and CLIL. Self-reflection on the outcomes of the experience was guided by the moderator to help the participants better understand the goals achieved during the pathway.

This initiative is in line with the recent "Good School" Reform (Law 107/2015) and in particular with the National Teacher Training Plan, which aims at reshaping continuous professional development for years 2016-19.

## Acknowledgements

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Items translated into English by the author.

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