

Linking Readers Theatre to CLIL in foreign language education

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of linking Readers Theatre (RT), a group reading aloud activity, with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in foreign language education. Both RT and CLIL, independent of each other, have demonstrated affective and cognitive benefits for foreign language learners. Examples are provided of how subject matter texts, for example about history, can be adapted and created for RT in the foreign language classroom. Reference is made to positive experiences for both learners and teachers of the combination of RT and CLIL in lower secondary English classrooms in Norway. Finally, classroom implications are addressed, for example how the combination of RT and CLIL integrates different language skills, how combining the two allows for a focus on form within a meaning-based approach, and how group dynamics can aid the individual learner.

1. Introduction and aims

This article explores the link between Readers Theatre (RT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in foreign language education. Readers Theatre is a group reading aloud method that has been used in mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2) classrooms (Chan and Chan 2009; Samuels 1997). CLIL is an approach in which the target language is used to learn about another subject, for example English as a foreign language is used to learn history (Coyle, Hood, and Marsh 2010). Both RT and CLIL have histories reaching back to the ancient world (Coger and White 1967; Simensen 1998), yet both are equally relevant in contemporary education. Independent of each other, both have been implemented with positive outcomes in foreign language education (e.g. Chan and Chan 2009; Sylven 2004). However, it is the interplay between the two that is the focus of this article: In what way can Readers Theatre be used in the context of CLIL or vice versa? In what way can this combination of the two be beneficial for foreign language learners? Addressing these questions is important as the link between CLIL and RT represents an innovative approach to language teaching. A new approach creates variation and is often inspiring to language learners and teachers; in this case the approach integrates subject matter with both oral and written language skills and simultaneously provides training in the ability to communicate meaningfully, one of the most important aims of language learning. Although the principles discussed apply to foreign language education in general, the article's primary point of reference is English as a foreign language in the Norwegian school context.

2. Readers Theatre

2.1 The nature and origins of Readers Theatre

RT is a method of oral communication which involves several readers reading aloud a text that has been divided into smaller units. Since it combines reading with oral language, it is an integrated language activity involving speaking, listening, reading and, in some cases, writing. Although the method was not developed specifically with foreign language learners in mind, it can easily be applied to this target group in addition to its use in mother tongue contexts.

In principle, any text can be adapted for RT, for example factual texts, stories and poems. Stories and folk tales have been the primary genres used for RT (Shepard 2004a, 2004b, 2007). However, Flynn (2004) describes positive experiences of using RT in connection with the American Revolution in junior high school classes in the US. The method thus also has a potential with factual texts, which is the focus of its use in the present context.

Before reading the text aloud to an audience, who could simply be other pupils in a class, the readers practise the text by reading it a number of times. By doing so, they become gradually more familiar with the text and their reading becomes clearer and more fluent. When reading the text, both in practice and performance, the script is always visible. Although the rehearsed reading aloud of a text is the fundamental principle behind RT, the activity can take many forms and involve different numbers of readers.

The origins of RT can be traced back to the recital of epic poems by bards in ancient Greece (Coger and White 1967). The method experienced a renaissance in modern times, both as a form of theatre, especially in the United States and in Great Britain, and as an educational activity. The 1950s and 60s witnessed the production of RT performances both on Broadway and by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Colleges and universities, especially in the US, put up their own performances of RT, and schools, realizing the educational potential of RT incorporated it into the curriculum. Although not widely practised as a form of theatre today, RT has continued to be used in schools in mother tongue contexts (Peebles 2007; Tyler and Chard 2000), and has also been applied to foreign language classrooms (Chan and Chan 2009; Drew and Pedersen 2010, 2012).

2.2 Research into Readers Theatre

The practice of RT in schools has led to a body of research on its educational value. Most of this research has been conducted as case studies in individual classes (e.g. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker 1999; Rinehart 1999). Several studies show that RT has a positive influence on pupils' motivation and confidence to read aloud, partly because of its nature as a group reading activity (Rinehart 1999; Uthman 2002). Pupils who would otherwise have been reluctant to read aloud individually, thrive in the role of being part of a group of readers with collective responsibility for the text (Black and Stave 2007, 14). In fact, several studies have been conducted among groups of so-called struggling readers, whose motivation to read and attitudes to reading become more positive as a consequence of experiencing RT (e.g. Drew and Pedersen 2010; Rasinsky 2006; Tyler and Chard 2000; Uthman 2002). In addition to affective gains, RT also leads to positive benefits on pupils' cognitive development. Gains have been recorded in increased reading speed, improved word recognition, improved comprehension and fewer errors (Millin and Rinehart 1999; Samuels 1997). Moreover, pupils' reading ability improves as they progress from one text to another; the process of improvement is cumulative as they gradually become more and more proficient readers.

2.3 Models of Readers Theatre

RT can adopt many different forms depending on factors such as the type of text, number of readers and choices made by those taking part. Readers can sit, stand, alternate between sitting and standing, and can be mobile as they read. Two of the most familiar models are referred to by Shepard (2004a) as “traditional” and “developed”. In the traditional model, a variant of which is shown in Figure 1, readers are positioned in fixed places, in this case in a semi-circle. In the variant shown, there are seven readers, the most central of whom is the “narrator”.

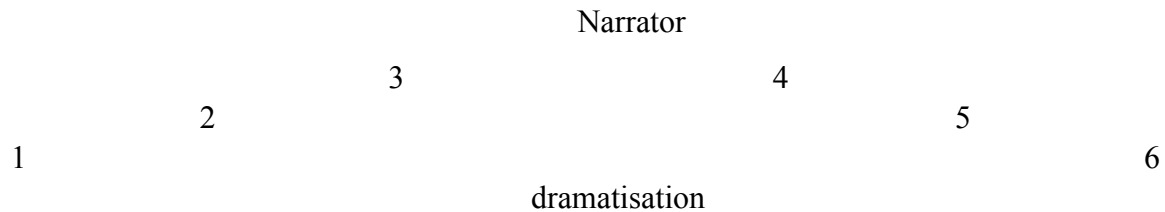


Figure1: A traditional model of RT

The reading takes place in a fixed order: Narrator, Reader 1, Reader 6, Reader 2, Reader 5, Reader 3, Reader 4, Narrator, and so on. Each reader reads a small segment of the text at a time until the whole text has been completed. To add variation, the readers sometimes stand before they read a line and sit after they have read another one. They look at whoever is reading at any given time to help the audience focus on the switches between the readers. Any unnecessary movements are avoided so that the audience is not distracted from the actual reading. The reading of the text may be complemented by dramatised scenes, performed by others, which are connected to the reading in some way. For example, a text about the American Civil Rights movement may be complemented by a dramatised scene involving a meeting between Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

In the developed model, a variant of which is shown in Figure 2, some readers are narrators, while others read the role of a character throughout. The model could, for example, apply to Shepard’s (2007) RT adaption of Roald Dahl’s *The Twits*, in which there are four narrators placed in the corners of a room, while two additional readers read the characters of Mr Twit and Mrs Twit. The two characters are mobile while they read, while the narrators are stationary.

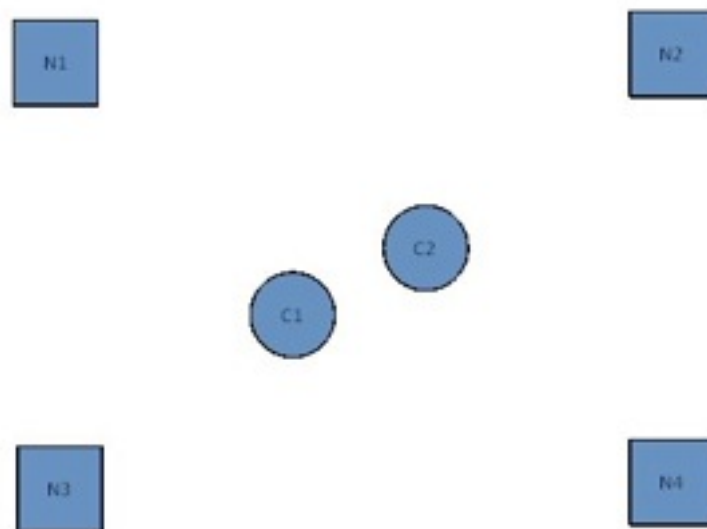


Figure 2: A developed model of RT

2.4 Sources of texts for Readers Theatre

The texts that can be used for RT in the classroom may originate from three main sources. Firstly, there are numerous texts available that have already been adapted or produced for RT, such as those by Dugan (2007) for younger learners and those by Shepard (2004b, 2007) for older learners. The majority of the texts are stories or folktales that have been rewritten as RT, for example the Norwegian folktale *Master Maid* (Shepard 2004b). Secondly, there are texts that a teacher or pupils adapt for RT, for example a newspaper article or a speech. Thirdly, there are texts that a teacher or, ideally, pupils create for RT. It is the latter two that have most potential in the present context, as most texts that are readily available for RT are stories and folktales.

3. CLIL

The fundamental principle of CLIL is that it serves two purposes at the same time. On the one hand, it helps pupils to develop their target language skills through immersion in that language. It is thus a meaning-based as opposed to form-based approach to foreign language learning. It creates an L2 naturalistic learning context similar to that of the L1, which in the view of some scholars is an optimal L2 learning situation (Krashen 1982; Lightbown and Spada 2006). On the other hand, the target language becomes a tool to learn about other subjects. It can be used, for instance, to learn about history, geography, religion and science in the language being learned.

Like RT, the origins of CLIL can be traced to the ancient world. The children of Roman nobility learned both the Greek language and other subjects when they were taught by Greek tutors (Simensen 1998). Their education was mediated through the Greek language, which was not their mother tongue. The same principle applied to the immersion programmes implemented in Canada in the 1960s, in which English-speaking Canadian children received

their school education in French (Cummins 1983). Since then, CLIL has grown in popularity throughout the world and has been the subject of a growing body of research (Coyle, Hood, and Marsh 2010).

Like RT, research into CLIL has shown that the approach leads to both affective and cognitive gains on learners. CLIL has a positive effect on both motivation and confidence (Wiesemes 2009). It allows learners to experience the functional and communicative purpose of learning a foreign language in a meaningful way. At the same time, the learners develop cognitively, both in terms of language proficiency and content knowledge. According to Naves (2009), CLIL pupils develop higher comprehension skills and are able to process larger amounts of information. CLIL pupils outperform non-CLIL pupils in cloze tests and receptive tests (Catalán and de Zarobe 2009). They also acquire more vocabulary and generally achieve a higher degree of communicative competence than their peers (Sylvén 2004, 2006).

CLIL is prevalent in the current Norwegian *KL06* subject curricula for English and foreign languages. One example is the link between English and numeracy, namely to mathematics, which is reflected in some of the competence objectives, e.g. ‘talk about currency, measures and weights’ (after grade 7, English subject curriculum). Other examples include the following competence objectives after year 10 in the *KL06* English subject curriculum:

- Explain features of history and geography in Great Britain and the USA;
- Discuss the way young people live, how they socialize, their views on life and values in Great Britain, the USA, and other English-speaking countries and Norway.

The competence objectives for English in upper secondary school after Vg1 (programmes for general studies) and Vg2 (vocational educational programmes) include:

- Discuss social and cultural conditions and values from a number of English-speaking countries;
- Present and discuss international news topics and current events.

Finally, the competence objectives in the curriculum for foreign languages after year 10 and Vg2 programmes for general studies include:

- Compare some aspects of traditions, customs and ways of living in the language region in question and in Norway
- Talk about the language and aspects of the geography of the language region in question
- Express experiences connected to the culture of the language region in question

Communication is extremely important in the curricula for English and foreign languages, constituting one of the three main areas in which the curricula are divided; the other two are Language learning and Culture, society and literature. RT can be used as a tool to communicate what learners discover about, for example, the historical, geographical and cultural aspects of the target languages, specified in the curricula’s learning objectives.

Actual practice of CLIL in Norway has primarily been confined to the upper secondary level in which the starting point has been the teaching of the curriculum of subjects such as history, religion, social science, physics and mathematics through English. A survey on CLIL in 2004 found that 3-4 per cent of Norwegian upper secondary schools practised some form of CLIL, with most classes lasting six months to a year (Bøhn, Hellekjær,

Svenhard and Servant 2004). Most CLIL classes were the result of local initiatives, either on the county, school or especially the individual teacher level (Svenhard, Servant, Hellekjær and Bøhn 2007). Interested and motivated teachers are extremely important for implementing CLIL; they need to feel confident about what they are doing and have a certain expertise in both the language and the content (Coyle et al. 2010).

One recent case study of CLIL in a Norwegian lower secondary school was conducted by Drew, where the starting point was English lessons in a 9th grade class (2013). During a period of about 12 weeks the class was immersed in English as they learnt about the Second World War from a global to a local perspective. Materials used included factual and fictional texts, excerpts from novels, autobiographies, witness reports, articles, anecdotes, poems and different historical texts. Films were also used and two native speakers of English were asked to address the class: a retired RAF Wing Commander and the author of a book about Commonwealth casualties buried in Norway. Activities included pupils working on a self-chosen topic which they researched and presented orally to the rest of the class and a self-chosen written assignment. The project was generally motivating and educational for the pupils, and rewarding but demanding for the teacher.

4. The interplay between RT and CLIL

Having established that both RT and CLIL have long histories, that they are both equally relevant in contemporary education, and that both lead to affective and cognitive gains in learners, the aim of the present section is to show how the two can be combined in foreign language education. In principle, this can happen primarily through factual texts adapted for RT by the teacher or pupils and factual texts created for RT, especially by pupils.

4.1 Adapting texts for RT and CLIL

A class of lower secondary school pupils may have been learning about the Second World War in English lessons, as described in Drew (2013). The focus of teaching would therefore relate to the *KL06* competence objective after grade 10 of learning about the history of the target language. If groups in the class are given the task of reading texts about different aspects of the war, RT can be used as a way of orally communicating these texts to the class. Within the wider topic of the Second World War, groups could be assigned topics on, for example, how the war started, the invasion of Norway and special operations during the war. An example of the latter is Operation Freshman, the first attempt to sabotage the Germans' production of heavy water in Vemork. One of the books written on this subject is *Longnor's Hero of Telemark* (Sheldon 2009), which is about one of the Royal Engineers, Vernon Belfield, who participated in the raid. The following passage, taken from this book, illustrates how a factual text about the Second World War can be adapted for RT using the traditional model with seven readers shown in 2.1. Adaptation for RT in this sense simply means dividing up the original text in smaller chunks and distributing the chunks among the various readers.

Narrator: Once the decision had been taken to attack the Norsk Hydro plant, several options on how to go about it were considered.

Reader 1: These included bombing, internal sabotage by Norwegian agents and sending in airborne troops.

Reader 6: After much deliberation, it was agreed to attack the plant using a specially trained unit of Royal Engineers.

Reader 2: The plan decided upon by Special Operations Executive (SOE) involved destroying the existing stocks of heavy water with explosives.

Reader 5: Then carrying out demolitions at the plant to deny the enemy the future production capacity of the Norsk Hydro.

Reader 3: The mission was to be code named Operation Freshman.

Reader 4: It was to be the first glider-borne operation attempted by the Allies during the Second World War.

Narrator: The men would be divided into two sections of fifteen, both commanded by a junior officer.... etc.

A group of pupils working on this sub-theme could adapt several sections of the book for RT in order to communicate to others the nature of Operation Freshman. Dramatised scenes involving other pupils, for example Vernon Belfield's last leave home to visit his family before departing on the mission, could complement the reading. When dramatised scenes are added to the reading, the readers sit passively while the dramatisation takes place in front of them.

Martin Luther King's famous speech *I have a dream*, is another example that could be adapted for RT as one of several texts on the theme of the American Civil Rights Movement. The topic could be considered as historical, namely as part of America's recent history, but also as addressing the *KL06* English subject competence objective after the first year of upper secondary school of learning about social and cultural conditions in English-speaking countries. The following RT adaptation of part of the speech involves three readers, illustrating the flexibility of RT in terms of numbers of readers:

Reader 1: And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

Reader 2: I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Reader 3: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Reader 1: I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

Reader 2: I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Reader 3: I have a *dream* today! etc.

A lower secondary school English teacher in Norway related to the author the experience of adapting Martin Luther King's speech to RT in a similar manner to that shown above while working on the theme of "Civil rights and indigenous peoples in the USA" in a 10th grade English class. The speech was used as one of several texts on the theme. Prior to rehearsing and performing their RT adapted texts, the pupils had gained insight into the theme through reading other texts and watching films. The pupils were enthusiastic about experiencing RT in this way; they appreciated being active, experiencing English in a challenging and meaningful

way, and were keen to try it again. They felt that they had improved their oral English and learned new vocabulary. The teacher, who had been sceptical to RT at the outset, was positively surprised and became convinced of its educational value.

4.2 Creating texts for RT and CLIL

An example of how texts can be created for RT in the context of CLIL is reported in Drew and Pedersen (2012). Two 9th grade English classes worked for about 12 weeks on the theme of the seven continents of the world, thus linking English to subjects such as history, geography, culture and current affairs. The classes were divided into groups of seven and each group was assigned a continent to research and present to the others in RT form. The pupils were familiar with RT, having earlier in the same academic year worked on both ready-produced RT texts and texts which they themselves had adapted for RT.

The author was present when the pupils were preparing their RT texts on the continents and when they performed their texts for the rest of the class. The level of engagement was extremely high, and it was clear that the pupils enjoyed both their own performances and listening to the others. Although RT was the fundamental principle of communication, namely that the pupils were reading from visible scripts, they showed creativity and innovation by using PowerPoint images, sound effects, costumes and other artifacts to enrich their performances. For example, a group who were presenting the continent of Africa, informed the listeners about the dangers of snakes. They then dramatized a scene in which a black mamba snake was killed. In addition to providing much factual information about the continent's geography, history and culture, two members of a group presenting the continent of South America, performed a tango dance.

The product of a group who had worked on the continent of Europe serves as a further example of the pupils' ingenuity and creativity. The group consisted of two boys and two girls. The girls adopted the roles of backpackers travelling around Europe and were mobile, as in the developed model of RT shown in 2.1. They provided factual information about Europe's history, for example the world wars, geography, for example in the continent's largest country, Russia, and current affairs, for example the deployment of European troops in Afghanistan. Sometimes they supported their reading with PowerPoint images on the screen. The two boys adopted the role of newsreaders in a studio, reading out current news items. The following is an extract from this group's presentation.

Backpacker 1: Europe is a continent located in the north. The countries are very different.

Backpacker 2: Some countries are hot and some are cold. Europe has the biggest country in the world. Europe is the second smallest continent.

Backpacker 1: In all of the countries it's very different religions. Many famous artists are coming from Europe. I bet you can find your favourite there.

Newsreader 1: Greece has had major problems with immigration, especially from Turkey.

Newsreader 2: The Schengen agreement says that the first European country is responsible for the immigrants and refugees.

Newsreader 1: As Greece is the neighbour country to Turkey, several of the legal and illegal immigrants choose to immigrate to Greece through Turkey...

One of the highlights of this group's presentation was dramatising the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* after the backpackers had referred to Shakespeare as one of the most famous Europeans ever.

All in all, this group's presentation, like that of the others, showed remarkable ingenuity, creativity, variation and richness of language. What they presented was also rich in facts and information. The author's knowledge of the continents of the world increased considerably by listening to the pupils' presentations. As a communicative activity, therefore, both what was being communicated and how it was being communicated happened in an extremely effective manner. When the author interviewed some of the pupils afterwards, they stressed the dual nature of their roles – they had enjoyed actively presenting their continent to the rest of the class, but they had also enjoyed and learned from listening to the other groups.

5. Classroom implications

The experience of the author is that what is new, innovative and non-traditional often appeals to learners in the foreign language classroom and is of high educational value. Both RT and CLIL are non-traditional in the sense that much foreign language teaching, at least in Norway, is based on a course book and the intensive reading of texts (Charboneau 2012; Drew, Oostdam and van Torenburg 2007; Hellekjær 2007). Both RT and CLIL, independent of each other, break with the familiar routine of working with texts in routine ways, such as asking and answering comprehension questions, translation and vocabulary tests. They both have a motivating effect on foreign language learners; the target language is used meaningfully and communicatively in the context of their use. The combination of RT and CLIL is even more innovative and potentially more exciting than when used independently of each other.

Course books for lower and upper secondary learners of English and foreign languages invariably contain texts of a cultural, geographical, political and historical nature (e.g Heian, Lokøy, Ankerheim and Drew 2009). However, the texts in a typical course book are likely to deal superficially with a topic or theme. For example, the theme of Northern Ireland is introduced in Heian et al. (2009) through interviews with two teenagers in Northern Ireland, supplemented by some brief historical and background information about the country. In the context of the given example, the course book could be used as a starting point for further study and not as an end in itself. Having been introduced to the theme through the course book, pupils could be challenged to use other materials and sources in order to explore sub-topics within the main theme in more depth. Within the theme of Northern Ireland, for example, groups could specialize in researching sub-topics such as the history of Northern Ireland, the Peace Process, the IRA, Bloody Sunday and the role of the British army. RT could then be used as a dynamic way for groups to present their findings to the others. It becomes an alternative to simply writing a text which is handed in to the teacher and which may never be publicized to the other learners in a class. It also becomes an alternative to the commonly practised form of oral presentations in lower and upper secondary schools that involve one or maybe two pupils addressing the rest of the class at a time (Chvala 2012); this commonly practised form lacks the group dynamics and vitality inherent in RT. Moreover, RT provides a good deal of support for the learners in the form of clear procedures and frameworks during the work process and the support of the text in the presentation phase. It is also highly stimulating for both the performers and listeners that the work is shared through a group performance.

Combination or integration is also a key concept in ways other than the link between RT and CLIL in the present context. One of the strengths of RT is that it is an activity that combines and integrates oral and written language in a natural way. The written text is communicated orally – it is read out aloud. The activity thus requires oral production, but at

the same time it involves listening; the readers listen to each other and the audience listens to the readers. When learners create their own texts, they also engage in writing, thus adding the fourth language skill. RT therefore becomes a “whole” language activity integrating the different language skills. As Goodman (1986, 30) argues: “Speaking, listening, writing and reading are all happening in context of the exploration of the world of things, events, ideas, and experiences... Integration becomes the central motif...” Both oral and written language become more meaningful when language users understand their functional purpose (Halliday 1978).

On another integrative level, RT also allows for the combination of meaning and form (Lightbown and Spada 2006). It allows for the focus on form in a communicative context, in this case a CLIL context in which subject matter is being communicated to a group of listeners. While rehearsing a text through repeated readings before performing the text to an audience, attention can be given to, for example, the pronunciation and stress of individual words, to intonation, and to the meaning of unfamiliar words. Enhancing vocabulary growth is one of the benefits of CLIL (Catalán and de Zarobe 2009; Sylven 2004, 2006). Moreover, learners become particularly conscious of details of language when they know that they will be communicating a text to an audience (Drew and Pedersen 2010; Martinez, Roser, and Strecker 1999). They strive to be as accurate and clear as possible. Even within a primarily meaning-based approach, which both RT and CLIL essentially are, it is important to remember that one of the primary objectives of language teachers is to help foreign language learners to develop their actual language. Of course, the teacher would be helping pupils to develop their language by creating meaning-focused contexts in which much incidental learning is likely to take place (Krashen 1982). However, there are times when conscious focus on form is also important, for example if words are mispronounced or if a learner is striving to understand the meaning of a word. The combination of incidental learning and focus on form is considered optimal by some scholars, for example Lightbown and Spada (2006).

Finally, it is worth commenting on the group dynamics associated with RT in its combination with CLIL. One of the reasons for the success of RT is that it is a collective activity in which the individual gains strength from being part of a larger unit, but also benefits from the experience individually. The experiences of both group writing and group reading have been beneficial for the individual writer and reader, both cognitively and affectively (Chan and Chan 2009; Pilarcik 1986). As Vygotsky (1986) argues, language development takes place through social interaction, which is a salient feature of RT in combination with CLIL. As a consequence of the group experience, the individual learner may be stimulated to read more in general and specifically about the subject in focus.

6. Conclusion

CLIL provides the context for using the target language functionally to learn about something else. RT becomes the tool for communicating that “something else” to others. The two complement each other in a dynamic way that has hitherto been little practised in the foreign language classroom. However, in those cases where the two have been combined, the experience has been meaningful, motivating and educational for the learners. The combination of RT and CLIL has a great potential for the explicit and implicit learning of language and vocabulary, in addition to learning subject matter. It can be used with different age and ability groups, and with different languages. It provides a different approach for

learners in the contemporary foreign language classroom, while at the same time preserving age-old forms of communicating and learning.

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