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The **A-B-C** of Content Learning in CLIL Settings

A Critical Thinking Approach to Philosophy & History within a **CLIL** Context



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interviews



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Jordi Nomen is a Philosophy and History professor at L'Escola Sadako in Barcelona, associate professor at the UAB in Social Sciences and has a Master in Philosophy from the University of Girona. He has also recently published EL NIÑO FILÓSOFO from Arpa Editores.

Paul Tompkins: What is the main purpose of teaching and learning non-CLIL as well as CLIL Philosophy in (post)compulsory education?

Jordi Nomen: Philosophy is made up of three different skills; critical thinking, creative thinking and mindful thinking. Likewise, Philosophy in general has three aims, three very interesting uses. One of them is critical thinking. We analyse arguments vs their validity, their viability, see the manipulation of these arguments, why they are produced and how they are produced. Secondly, Philosophy requires a high degree of creative thinking. However, Philosophy is different from science. The problem that exists with science,

from a philosopher's point of view, is that science looks for a solution to the problem. On the contrary, what Philosophy tries to do is to see the complexity of a problem, not just with the superfluous, but to fully delve into the problem and propose solutions. Unsurprisingly, it is probably through science that a final solution is found; the yes or no answer to the question. Philosophy does not resolve an issue. But, if in order to carry out a complete analysis of a problem many points of view are required, this is creative thinking. Remember that neither critical, creative nor mindful thinking are exclusive to Philosophy. This must be clear. They can be mixed and incorporated from any discipline or field of study. But if there is one thing good about Philosophy it is that it has no curriculum. There is no compulsory subject matter. In fact, it's the exact opposite; the subject matter is provided by or through human concern. Next there is mindful thinking. The philosophy that we propose is a Socratic Philosophy, where students share a dialogue amongst themselves, where they see diverse situations and where diversity enriches, where, for instance, one knows that voting perhaps isn't the best option, but rather achieving a consensus could be better for all concerned. This is citizenship at its highest order.

PT: Which reminds me of what is happening in our politics nowadays...

JN: Exactly. That is to say, if we put everything all together we see that Philosophy allows us to think for ourselves and think better. And better means on three different levels; thinking critically, creatively and ethically. That is exactly what mindful thinking means. When you speak with another person you try to convince him or her. You put yourself in their shoes not to beat them, but rather to convince them. That's mindful thinking. And it is the basis for democracy, in my opinion.

PT: How do current approaches to the teaching and learning of Philosophy differ from traditional encyclopedic approaches?

JN: It doesn't make any sense to teach Philosophy if you don't practice Philosophy. If you don't philosophize. The authors are the lever, the base, of course. For young children, there is no need to cite authors. We could speak of Nietzsche or Kant and not mention their names at all. Big names would only confuse them.

PT: Interesting. What role does language play in the teaching and learning of Philosophy? I feel that one of the biggest problems that exists for CLIL is that we have teachers who are either language teachers or content teachers. So what is the role of oral interaction, reading and written expression?

JN: It is fundamental. There is a problem because, of course, linguistic skills are essential in order to practice philosophy. When speaking of a Socratic dialogue, language is fundamental. Therefore, if we use CLIL as you say, there are skills lacking to be able to clearly express what one wants to express.

PT: This is the most interesting part: the integration of language and content. Support must exist from the Modern Languages department.

JN: You also have to remember that not all languages are the same. The native Innuits have thirty-two words to describe snow. Every language has its nuances and manners... Philosophy is based on an analysis of the language, and has a fundamental importance. Why can't someone say, "*in this case you must be merciful, you must be understanding?*" You then ask what the difference between being merciful or understanding is. Philosophy is very strict in what we are speaking about, otherwise we aren't going to understand each other.

PT: And doing this in English? Is there any advantage?

JN: It opens your mind to another culture. If it is done well, it would be a door to open your understanding of another culture. If we spoke of emotions, it could be useful to know how to say '*pena*', but how do you say '*pena*' in English? In Spanish we say '*tristeza*' (sadness). The difference is not just linguistic, but also philosophical.

PT: May the teaching and learning of Philosophy benefit in any way from being taught through English, or through any additional language in general? And with the language as a cross-curricular tool in the curriculum?

JN: Yes, there can be an advantage for both student and teacher. Perhaps it is more quickly and easily seen in the student, while for the teacher it is more difficult to see. If a student learns to be creative, critical and mindful, he or she won't be like that only in Philosophy classes, but in all of his or her classes. Here in Sadako we teach Philosophy from the age of 3 to 16.

The teacher who learns to use Philosophy with this program will become a Socratic teacher. So even if you teach lessons that aren't Philosophy classes, it is impossible not to use this approach. Teachers who have learned Math and Philosophy will teach by asking questions. In my case I teach Philosophy and History, and after having learned the Socratic dialogue over the years, I teach History and Philosophy in exactly the same way.

Philosophy in English is an interesting concept. Imagine children speaking English about Shakespeare and what *Love* means. A lot more interesting than learning about kitchens and utensils. You have to find out what interests them, concern for their circumstances, and help them to learn that in a language backdrop there is a culture.

PT: Please, explain one or more instances of exemplary teaching strategies especially useful in a quality Philosophy lesson.

JN: I always insist on the students producing a final product. The strategy of a philosophical dialogue works too. For example, if we are going to talk about identity I ask them if they feel that all identities are the same. Are you the same as when you were three? Does identity change or not? What do you understand identity to be? The teacher asks and asks and asks. Never answers. When this part is over, I ask them to create *Identity* with modeling clay. Or if we are talking about *Love*, I'll ask them to mime what *Love* is. Show it. Or show it with a drawing! A poem, a short sketch, a song. There is an enormous plasticity.

PT: Once you have done that how do you evaluate the final product?

JN: They do it themselves.

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PT: With a rubric, for example?

JN: Yes, or it could be with an analogical figure evaluation, which I am sure you are unfamiliar with, because it is widely unheard of. This is an evaluation with images. If I would like to know whether students have understood a dance or if the dance itself was deep or whether they have understood it at all. I give them four images: one is the bottom of the sea, one is a well, another is a bowl of custard and a fourth is a puddle. I ask them to choose one of the images that best represents their understanding of the dance with regard to the depth of their understanding of the interpretation. The students raise their images up for everyone to see and those that have done the dance can see that perhaps 15 have shown the bottom of the sea! If students managed to reach 15 students on a deeper level then perhaps this can be considered a success.

PT: Could you recommend a few authors, books or articles apart from your own, of course?

JN: Mathew Lipman, Philosophy for Children. He's the creator of Philosophy for children in the USA. There is also John Dewey, a great pedagogue, who discusses how to work dialogue in the classroom.

PT: Do you hold on to any particular pedagogical, psychological, philosophical or linguistic view or theoretical framework??

JN: Well, you know, I tend to shy away from '-isms'. What's also important is to avoid impulses. We tend to classify ourselves in these '-isms' and as such should use fewer labels.

PT: I think it is such a shame that the subject of Philosophy has been killed off in Bachillerato...

JN: It's normal. Those in power tend to kill off Philosophy. Nothing strange there. I do think that one of the greatest errors we make is to argue amongst ourselves. We need to join synergies with other subjects and departments and work towards a common theme. Look for themes not skills, establish links, decide what we are going to do together... it is a passionate topic. This, however, implies a reform of Bachillerato, the Selectividad, which unfortunately aren't skill based and as such mean nothing. The level of maturity of the student is not measured.

I want to share an activity I did with a group of students in my social studies class. I asked them to close their eyes and imagine airplanes bombing the city. I then read them a text...*“you are in the street, you hear airplanes coming, the civil defense sirens sound, the Generalitat announces ‘Catalans, we are going to be bombed’. You don't now where your parents are, you don't know what's going on. But you have to think that the bombs are going to be falling shortly. The airplanes are getting nearer and nearer.”* Suddenly I stop reading and I played the sounds of bombs exploding... bam, boom, kaboom. To finish up the activity I asked them what they felt. There were children crying, telling me ‘I was imagining that I couldn't find my parents, a bomb fell right in the middle of my house and I was hiding in the metro. My parents were dead’. Others said they could imagine what their parents were thinking at that moment. How much they were suffering...

Afterwards they were asked to make a poster and find the exact place in Barcelona where bombs had fallen in the Spanish Civil War. Then with the poster in hand, go to the exact spot and tell passers-by that if they had been in that sort at the specific time both student and passer-by would now be dead.

PT: Here is where the language teacher would be able to play a support role with vocabulary, expressions, phrases, etc.

JN: Of course, if a tourist were there the students could explain the story in English. Why not?

Undoubtedly, Mr. Nomen's view on Philosophy in the classroom and in a CLIL approach could be a catalyst for a change in our classrooms. ■