FLATLAND: A PLACE IS A LANGUAGE
A CLIL module to refresh students' interest in scientific subjects
Based on A.E. Abbott *Flatland, A Romance of many dimensions,* 1884
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Introduction

The CLIL module[1] here presented was carried out by the English and Mathematics teachers in the fifth form of a Language course at the ITAS "P.Scalcerle", an Italian secondary school in Padua. The aim was to creatively refresh the students' interest in Mathematics and Physics through the integration of the scientific area with the literary and linguistic "dimensions" of English. The fantastic English novel, *Flatland, A Romance of many dimensions,* written by A.E. Abbott in 1884, offered the ground for the analysis. In fact the main characters of the story are geometrical figures and the setting consists in different dimensions and/or fantastic worlds and unusual situations. Style is basically realistic, denotative and scientific, but also rich in irony and satire

The project is presented and discussed in this paper to assess the experience and highlight its most qualifying aspects, among which the theoretical reference supporting the didactic choices made and the role and level of participation of the discipline teacher. A basic proposal for assessing and optimizing his competence on the medium language is introduced as hint for further development in the field.

1. References
Many are the theoretical references which can be highlighted in a CLIL approach[2], but only some of them are reported in this paper as basic reference for the CLIL project implemented. In particular we are referring to Cooperative Learning, Action Research and the Common European Framework assumptions on Communicative Competence.

1.1 CLIL and Cooperative Learning
CLIL as a new learning/teaching environment offers more than one opportunity to implement cooperative learning. The model *Group Investigation/Small Group Teaching*, devised by Sharan-Herzt-Lazarowitz (1980), shows the following similarities and analogies with the approach experienced in our module: selection of study areas; groups of two-six members; selection of subtopic per group; survey of the topic in accordance with the programme/syllabus; organization of laboratories; individual survey; sharing results; presentation to the class; individual and group assessment; use of high skills such as ability to carry out a research; ability to synthesize and transfer information; tight interdependence between groups.

For a deeper understanding of the reference we report the adapted version of the approach (Pavesi 2004)

"The Group-Investigation (G-I) model" is conceived as progressing through a sequence of six steps and it is suitable for students aged 17-19 years old as it requires high cognitive skills, accountability and interdependence. The four critical components of Group investigation are: INVESTIGATION, INTERACTION, INTERPRETATION, INTRINSIC MOTIVATION.

1) Selection by group members of specific subtopics within a general problem area usually delineated by the teacher. Students scan sources, propose questions, and sort them into categories. The categories become subtopics. Students join the group on the basis of their interest on the specific sub-topic proposed(Intrinsic motivation is a key component in our module);

2) Cooperative planning by students and teacher of specific learning procedures, tasks, and goals consistent with the subtopics of the problem selected in Step 1. Group members plan their investigation cooperatively; they decide what they will investigate, how they will go about it and how they will divide the work among themselves (Role assignment);

3) Group members carry out their plan formulated in Step 2. Learning should involve a wide variety of activities and skills, and should lead students to different kinds of sources both inside and outside the school. The teacher closely follows the progress of each group and offers assistance when needed. Group

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[1] The project was presented by the author of the article at TESOL NATIONAL CONFERENCE Crossing Borders, Rome, November 2008, in the section New Learning Paths

[2] See Gardner, Wallace, Vigostky, Bruner, Willis etc

members gather, organize, and analyze information from several sources. They pool their findings and form conclusions. Group members discuss their work in progress in order to exchange ideas and information and to expand, clarify, and integrate them;

4) Pupils analyze and evaluate information obtained during Step 3, and plan how it can be summarized in some interesting fashion for possible display or presentation to the rest of the class;

5) Some or all of the groups in a class then give a presentation of the topics studied in order to get their classroom peers involved in each other's work, and to achieve a broad perspective on the topic. The instructor coordinates the group presentations. Presentations are made to the class in a variety of forms. The audience evaluates the clarity and appeal of each presentation, as well as the professional quality of the presentation.

6) Evaluation by classroom peers and instructor of each group's contribution to the work of the class as a whole, in cases where groups pursued different aspects of the same topic. Evaluation can include either individual or group assessment, or both. Evaluation includes assessment of higher level thinking processes. (see evaluation criteria) "

1.2 CLIL and Action Research

CLIL is considered an innovative approach to teaching/learning, as such it shows some characteristics peculiar to research activities. It is a sort of field survey and as such, its structure reflects an action-research cycle. Schön (1983) and Kemmis (1986) provide the reference pattern based on the following steps: initial reflection-planning-action-observation-reflection and evaluation-likely change-new planning.(Coonan 2000) To exemplify the idea, let us consider the conclusive phase. The assessment of the module is implemented according to the kind of reflection carried out in AR through a set of questions which actually foster reflective assessment (Wallace 1991): *Have the objectives been successfully accomplished? Is there anything to be changed? Why?...* The answers may show that the cycle was successfully implemented, or may mark the beginning of a new, modified cycle of research as in our particular case, where the participants' feedback pointed out some aspects to be reconsidered for a more successful further experience.

2.3 CLIL and teachers' competences

One of the most crucial aspects of CLIL teaching in Italy is the competence of content teachers on the foreign/medium language (Ludbrook 2008). Many of them are competent in different areas of one or more foreign languages. When they approach CLIL their first reaction is quite dubious since they associate teaching to the only technique they usually adopt in their praxis, the so called *lezione frontale*, which obviously requires a high level of competence in spoken language, in the language of exposition, in the capacity of facing interaction with students' questions and answers. What is necessary to do, at a CLIL initial stage is, first of all, to map the competences the content teachers already have, recuperating the idea of *Partial Competence* introduced in the CEF(Council of Europe 1998) An *ad-hoc* diagnostic test can be submitted to check the state of the art. The module here presented includes such very experimental approach, which has no "official" scientific validity, but which can certainly help the content teacher to become more confident in his/her perception of "how competent" he/she is in the foreign language. Besides it is necessary to involve the content teacher in a series of teaching strategies which go beyond the lecture, and help him/her develop a new, more active and effective teaching competence (Serragiotto 2003) based on multiple modalities and supporting strategies (i.e. *scaffolding*). When they realize that CLIL may become the vehicle of new strategies to be transferred to and used in her/his ordinary subject lessons to achieve better results, they begin to understand and appreciate that the "partial competence" they have in the language can be spent in meaningful activities with their classes. This may be the starting point to feed a new consciousness about improving his/her overall competence in the FL and taking advantage from all the opportunities he/she is able to catch in the rich field of Foreign Language Learning.

2. TheProject

The CLIL module implemented can be summarized as follows:
-**Title**: *Flatland: a Place is a Language*
-**School and period**: ITAS Scalcerle-Padova 2007/8, Second Term
-**Target audience**: 5th D, last year of a language course
-**Level of competence**: B1+/B2 level of Common European Framework for the Languages

-**Subjects**: English, Physics and Mathematics
-**Expected time**:
Teachers' joint planning **: (**10 hrs)
    -Project in the POF (Annual Plan of the School Formative Offer), September 2007
    -Monitoring, reflecting: (February-May)
Students' joint planning   (10 hrs)
- Students organize groups, assign roles, create and organize materials:(March-May)
- Presentation and assessment of students' products (May 2008)
- Final assessment of the module (May 2008)

*Actual teaching***: (**20 hrs).
- Introduction (February 2007)
- Lessons   (March   2008)
- Conclusion (May   2008)

-**Objectives***:*
General:
✓To refresh students' interest in scientific subjects
Specific
✓Recognise and deepen scientific content on Multidimensionality, Geometry and Physics in a narrative English text.

✓Use English and Italian to study, present and discuss the topics analysed in written and spoken form, with the support of multimedia tools and visual organizers.

✓Establish connections with and make inferences from different ideas, situations and communication codes

✓Compare and contrast texts from the same sub-genre (Science fiction; Fantasy; Dystopian novels)

✓Transfer the learning strategies adopted to other subjects and topics to plan and develop the interdisciplinary project for the School-leaving exam (Esame di Stato)

-**Themes**
✓Relativity: Time-Space relationship; Gravitational Fields
✓Multidimensionality: From one-dimension to *n*-dimension worlds
✓Codes and Languages: Use of communication codes, (sight, hearing, touch…), Transcodifying experiences
✓Colour in Physics and in Flatland Society
✓Literature and Society, Shapes and Social Roles (Women in the Victorian Age)
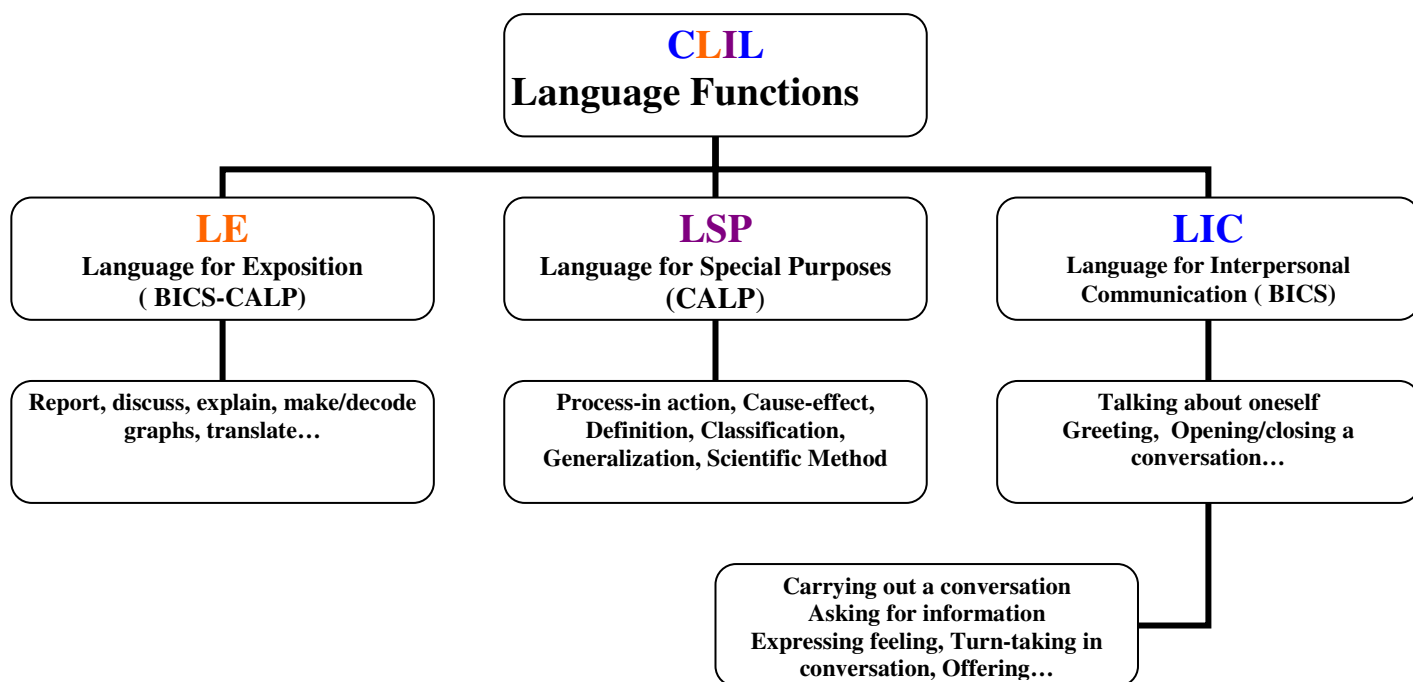✓Non-Euclideian Geometry
✓

2.1**Materials and activities**

Most of the materials used for the analysis are authentic and original; only when necessary, they have been adapted to the specific didactic needs. The videos are particularly useful to motivate and involve the students in the analysis. [3] The students´ production is an interesting example of how BICS and CALP strategies can be activated through adequate materials. The following graph (Fortuna 1998) synthesizes the basic functions of language which may characterise a CLIL project and which actually inspired the module presented

Fig1

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[3] For further details surf the following sites http://www.flatlandthemovie.com/; http://www.whatthebleep.com/download/

CLIL
Language Functions

LE **Language for Exposition** **(BICS-CALP)**	**LSP** **Language for Special Purposes** **(CALP)**	**LIC** **Language for Interpersonal** **Communication (BICS)**
Report, discuss, explain, make/decode graphs, translate…	Process-in action, Cause-effect, Definition, Classification, Generalization, Scientific Method	Talking about oneself Greeting, Opening/closing a conversation…

Carrying out a conversation
Asking for information
Expressing feeling, Turn-taking in
conversation, Offering…

For what concerns the actual contents [4] of the analysis, the teachers selected some sections from Abbott's novel on the basis of their relevance in the curricular activities and their direct or indirect connection with the "epistemological roots" of the disciplines involved[5]. For instance, *Concerning the Women* (Ch4), is connected with the theme "Victorian Women" developed in Literature, through the different texts read and analysed.[6] Amusing is the description of the Female Code approved to prevent any dangerous consequence of all the actions women do:*" A woman is a needle…all point, add to this the power of making herself practically invisible at will, ad you will perceive that a Female in Flatland is a creature by no means to be trifled with."… "To my readers in Space land the condition of our women may seem truly deplorable and so indeed it is…"Once a woman, always a Woman" is a Decree of Nature….and the very Laws of Evolution seem suspended in her disfavour".*

Geometry offers interesting opportunities for a more scientific analysis as the characters of the novel are geometrical figures. During the literary analysis some questions have been highlighted by the English teacher and the students to be furtherly discussed with the Mathematics teacher, for example: "Is the following statement from the text scientifically supported? If yes, by which specific laws or references?"

"…in the Southern and less temperate climates, where the force of gravitation is greater, and human beings more liable to casual and involuntary motions…"?

2.2 **Teachers' roles**

The Discipline Teacher deals with and monitors the scientific content and codes and makes reference to the English version of the novel As a teacher of scientific disciplines, he is able to read and understand the scientific references of the text, which enable him to listens to and evaluate the students' final presentations. .[7]For what concerns the oral presentation and interaction during his ordinary lessons he uses Italian.

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[4] As preparatory work, students were asked to read Abbott's novel during their summer holidays, at the end of the 4th year (In English and Italian. The English version was downloaded from Internet:by some students, while others read the Penguin edition.

[5] Here you find all the chapters selected: Ch 5 Of Our Method of Recognizing one another, Ch 6 Of Recognition by Sight, Ch 10 Of the Suppression of Chromatic sedition, Ch 13 How I had a Vision of Lineland, Ch 14 How I vainly tired to explain the nature of Flatland, Ch 15 Concerning a stranger from Spaceland,, Ch 16 How the stranger vainly endeavoured to reveal to me in words the . mysteries of Spaceland, Ch 17 How the sphere, having in vain tried words, resorted to deeds; Ch 18 How I came to Spaceland and what I saw there , Ch 22 How I then Tried to diffuse the Theory of Three Dimensions TTD) by other means, and of the result.

[6] L. Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*; G.Eliot: *Middlemarch*; C. Brontë: *Jane Eyre*; T. Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; A. Byatt, *Possession*; G. Orwell, *1984;* A Huxley, *Brave New World*

[7] see the CEF concept of "partial competence" , ch 7, p.95 ssgg

The English Teacher deals with and monitors all the sections of the novel concerned with communication and socio-cultural aspects. English is the medium language for all the activities. (Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing …).

2.3 Students' role

Students are supposed to carry out their survey in group. Groups are spontaneously formed and the areas of investigation are chosen by the students themselves[8]. As final activity, each group presents the results of the analysis to their mates and to the teachers, during a joint session (*Compresenza*/team-teaching). The information is gathered and systematised in a PowerPoint presentation organized on the basis of the following criteria:

-*The slides are in English*, especially for the descriptive and literary sections; Italian may be used to integrate the comment of the scientific sections. To make a slide in English (max 6/8 slides) is a very useful practice. It helps to synthesize and reduce the topic studied to basic and meaningful key concepts, which means to use "high" cognitive skills. It is the evidence that the survey has been carried out adequately and that one of the most relevant objectives in the programme has been successfully accomplished[9]

-*Slides are not meant to be read.* They are just a help, an outline for the oral comment. Students are supposed to integrate them, with the necessary reference.

-*Each group works according to shared, pre-established organization[10].* All the students are obviously supposed to know the whole novel, but three-four persons per group have to study-in-depth some specific topics or sections. The activity may be useful to plan and develop the interdisciplinary project for the School leaving exam (Esame di Stato)

3. Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is a crucial point in CLIL. No prescriptive rules are to be followed, but the actual praxis suggests adopting an integrated approach, which proves to be flexible and suitable to the purpose. Consequently the different contents can be assessed through different kinds of tests, separately or in integration. For instance, a multiple choice test or a laboratory experiment can assess the knowledge of the scientific content; a written report can prove the acquired competence both in the language/style and the content; a PowerPoint presentation or a hypertext can give evidence of knowledge of the topics as well as competence in using the communication skills required.[11] The grades in the different tests can be grouped in one combined mark or may be referred to separately, by each teacher. The present module adopted such approach, which was negotiated and agreed upon by the students and teachers. Below you find some information about the type of evaluation carried out in the module:

- Presentation in Italian and/or English through multimedia support (PowerPoint,) of the results with appropriate reference to the literary and scientific aspects of the survey. [12]
- Written and/or oral test in the single disciplines, separately.

The presentation was assessed according to the following criteria:

- Distribution of work in the groups
- Aesthetic value and creativity
- Presentation timing and appropriate slide-content match
- Specific content (exhaustive, appropriate, effective interdisciplinary links….)
- Adequate use of communication codes (Vehicular/medium Language, L1 when necessary, scientific language)
- Use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology)skills

Grades are in accordance with the grade scale used in the school ordinary evaluation[13]. The examples reported below are referred to four groups out of eight, just as a sample.

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[8]Cfr the following list of the topics students selected from the novel: **Group 1** Introduction: Reference to D'Amico's *Preface to the novel* and other materials useful for the contextualization of the novel. **Group 2** section 4: *Victorian Women*; Cultural/Literary/Scientific references; **Group 3** sections 5,6,10*: Sight and Light*, reference to Maxwell for contextualization; **Group 4 Group 5 Group 6** *sections 13/14;*15/16*; 17/18 Visions, Geometry and Communication Codes;***Group 7** section 22:*Tridimensionality, Diffusion of theories and Communication.* Reference to Einstein for contextualization; **Group 8** *Conclusions*: Reference to Manganelli's essay and other authors and texts in the programme of English Literature.

[9] For furthet information on the materials producedin the module visit: http://www.istituto-scalcerle.it/ and http://www.iteinaudi.org/

[10] cfr. Cooperative Learning in the theoretical section of this paper

[11] see fig 1-(synthezising, transcodifying, establishing connections and so on so forth).

[12] Activity carried out during the compresenza/team teaching sessions (contact time 3 hours)

[13] Excellent/10, Very good/9, Good/8, Satisfactory/7, Sufficient/6, Fail/4-3

Group 1 *Introduction with reference to Masolino D'Amico's preface and other materials for the contextualization of the work:*
Evaluation of group : Good; evaluation of single students (3): S1 very good, S2 very good, S3 satisfactory.
Group 2 *Victorian women : cultural, social, literary and scientific connections:*
Evaluation of group: sufficient+¸ evaluation of single students (3): *S1 sufficient+, S2 sufficient, S3 good*
Group 3 *Sight and Light :Reference to Maxwell to contextualise the topic:*
Evaluation of group: Good; evaluation of single students(4): *S1 very good, S2 very good, S3* good,+ *S4* good
Gruppo 4 *Vision. Geometry and communication codes*
Evaluation of group: satisfactory ; evaluation of single students(4): *S1 satisfactory, S2 satisfactory,*
S3 satisfactory, *S4* satisfactory+

3.1 **Students' feedback and self assessment**
The students are invited to assess, their work and the whole module considering the following aspects:[14]
- effectiveness of research (useful, useless, easy, difficult)
- lay out of presentation and consistency with the theme presented (words + images…)
- synthesis of one or more topics in a presentation…
- accuracy of specific information and language use
- use of foreign language for specific scientific topics
- period of research..

Some of the most meaningful comments, through class discussion and a short written text, are reported below. They broadly reflect the general opinion of the class on the activity[15]:
-S1[16]: The research wasn't really hard but we had too many things to say and not much time to present them effectively. The exposition was fragmentary. The combination of the two parts (Scientific and cultural-linguistic) was easy enough. Hard to create a PowerPoint presentation.
-S2: The work was useful, a bit difficult to carry out the research in this very busy, last period of the year.(better to choose the first term)
-S3: it was a bit hard to find links between chapters. I agree with Anna for the period, which affected the results. PowerPoint was not hard, the research was very useful. The most difficult thing was to synthesize all the things in few lines, in short time .
-S4:The most difficult thing was the connection with Physics, especially in English and, moreover, the division of chapters per groups. Some people had more things to discuss. The division , on the other side, was more effective because each of us now knows the different parts and can put them together.
-S5:For what concerns the layout of the slides I must say that it was the first time I used PowerPoint, but what helped me was to decide the essential things to focus on…

3.2 Teachers' feedback and proposals
The module was basically meant to refresh students' interest in scientific subjects. Actually the results prove that such objective was probably too ambitious for the following reasons:
- sporadic and experimental nature of the project
- course year (last one) chosen for implementation
- limited level of flexibility and participation in the medium language on the part of the content teacher
- limited level of flexibility on the students' part
However, despite all that, the interweaving of content and language was perceived and appreciated by the students who were able to recognize the usefulness of such approach for a more effective learning in general. The Gelmini Reform[17] of Italian Secondary Education introduces CLIL modules in the general Syllabus, so an institutional and well structured plan of initial and in-service teacher training on CLIL is, at this point, absolutely necessary to train all the teachers to realize the importance of such approach and learn the basic rules of its implementation. The experiences carried out until now have produced interesting effects on the content teacher's methodology like, for example: simplification of instruction, increase of written materials ,wider use of redundancy, assessment of comprehension, cooperative learning.
Considering this the educational institutions should work on the following aspects:

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[14] Conclusive lesson (3 June 2008)
[15] Only a limited number of students participated actively to the discussion, but they were actually the "spokespersons" for the single working groups.
[16] S1,2/ stands for Student 1, Student 2,etc.
[17] Legge di Riforma Gelmini 1 Settembre 2008 N. 137

- Value teachers' and students' competences (linguistic, pedagogical, disciplinary, organizational)
- Encourage all the teachers to work in team, also through adequate incentives,
- Involve and/or sensitize non-teaching staff
- Grant access to funding at local, national and international level(De Matteis 2009)
- Plan regular In-service specific training and consultancy for teachers
- Encourage a pedagogical use of ICT(Information and communication technology)

Conclusions

Many are the factors in favour of CLIL. Its pedagogical implications are rich and useful for the educational needs of the contemporary learning society. This paper tries to guide the reader along a possible path characterized by different elements like the great intrinsic value of teachers' and students' existing competences and their consequent optimization. Students, in particular, are the vital component of the experience. They can help highlight what they need as learners as well as citizens of the new millennium. What is paramount, in any case, is the desire and need to find and experiment new ways to make education more and more effective and adequate to our fast- developing society.

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Encl. 1

SELF ASSESSMENT TEST IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR A CLIL SUBJECT–TEACHER

The following checklist is adapted for you from the European Language Portfolio of competences in a foreign language (Council of Europe 1998-2000-2005). It includes the descriptors of competence from the B1 level, one of the conventional levels of the CEF (Common European Framework).

Teacher_____

Language/ Subject_____

Think about what you can do and tick the column that refers to your present level of competence

1= yes, you can do that, No, you cannot do that, 3= you need more practice

Feel free to add more descriptors of competence if necessary (you may have other skills in the foreign languages which are not listed in the table. In italics some descriptors of competence particularly useful in CLIL).

Descriptor	1	2	3
Overall Reading comprehension: *Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his /her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension.* *Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts whether or not they relate to his/her own area of speciality, provided he/she can reread difficult sections;* *Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning*			
Reading correspondence: Can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters well enough to correspond regularly with a pen friend			
Reading for orientation : *Can scan longer texts in order to locate desired information, and gather information from different parts of a text, or from different texts in order to fulfil a specific task;* Can find and understand relevant information in everyday material, such as letters, brochures and short official documents.			
Reading for Information & Argument: *Can recognise the line of argument in the treatment of the issue presented, though not necessarily in detail;* Can recognise significant poi nts in straightforward newspaper articles on familiar subjects.			
Reading Instructions: Can understand clearly written straightforward instructions for a piece of equipment.			
Overall Spoken Interaction and Production: *Can communicate with some confidence on familiar routine and non routine matters related to his/her interests and professional field.* *Can exchange, check and confirm information, deal with less routine situations and explain why something is a problem.* Can express thoughts on more abstract, cultural topics such as films, books, music, etc. Can exploit a wide range of simple language to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling. Can enter unprepared into conversation of familiar topics, express personal opinions and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life(e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events) *Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within is/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points*			
Addressing audiences: *Can give a prepared straightforward presentation on a familiar topic within his/her field which is clear enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time , and in which the main points are explained with reasonable precision;* can give a short rehearsed presentation on a topic pertinent to his/her everyday life, briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions.			
Production Strategies(Planning, compensating, monitoring&repair): *Can rehearse and try out new combinations and expressions, inviting feedback; Can work out how to communicate the main point(s)he/she wants to get across, exploiting any resources available and limiting the message to what he/she can recall or find the means to express.* *Can define the features of something concrete for which he/she can't remember the word;* *Can use a simple word meaning something similar to the concept he/she wants to convey and invites "correction";* *Can foreignise a mother tongue word and ask for confirmation; can start again using a different tactic when communication breaks down;*			