Applying CLIL Approach to English Teaching in a Japanese University

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Abstract*:* Recently, a teaching approach called Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been recognized in the Japanese education system. The purpose of this paper is to go over its main features and assess how the CLIL approach affected 41 junior students in a Japanese university was identified. Both the advantages and difficulties of applying CLIL in the classroom are clarified.

Key words: content and language integrated learning (CLIL); Japanese university; English language teaching:

Introduction

One of the responsibilities of English teachers is to pursue the most appropriate approach for supporting students' learning, since there is no such thing as a perfect teaching approach in any language learning environment. Here in Japan, students usually study English as a compulsory and/or elective foreign language course for six years: three years in junior high school and another three years in high school. However, according to the Education First EF English Proficiency Index, the data indicates that Japan ranked 37th place out of 80 non-majority native English-speaking countries, placing it in the *low proficiency* category (2017). Thus, it is obvious that alternative approaches to learning English should be considered and applied to all levels of students who study English in Japan.

Recently, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasized the importance of language education by citing the need for "improving Japan's global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations" (2017). The government wants students to be more active and enthusiastic, emphasizing the need for active learning. The MEXT (2014) indicated "students should be able to reason, make decisions or express

oneself in English as well as a desire to promote more global citizens amongst the populace."

CLIL

CLIL stands for *Content and Language Integrated Learning*, and it is a relatively new teaching approach within the field of second language education. Students learn both content and language at the same time, for instance Japanese students learning subjects like math or social studies in English. Researchers said that it is a "dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010, p. 1). The purpose of CLIL is to provide students with opportunities to learn both subject matter and language. It was first described in the 1990th in Europe, where there has been political will to improve language learning for its citizens. At that time, the language policy of the EU emphasized the importance of acquiring two additional languages "MT + 2" (mother tongue plus two languages) (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 155).

To understand CLIL, elements called the 4Cs Framework should be identified. This is a holistic approach where content, communication, cognition, and culture are integrated. This framework defines the major differences from other approaches like *Immersion* or *Content Based Learning*. (Coyle et al., 2010, pa. 53). In other words, an effective CLIL approach is based on appropriate subject matter, and students would experience active learning and that allows them to interact, developing global awareness and building up cooperation through learning.

Among the 4Cs in CLIL program, content and communication are the two backbones. Content refers to the subject or theme, and consists of "the knowledge, skills and understanding" that instructors try to provide for students (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 53). One of the essential things for an effective CLIL program is to choose authentic materials for students. However, it can be difficult for instructors to prepare authentic materials since usually authentic material is usually not written for the purpose of learning English (Ohmori, 2014). This is because another part of the framework, communication is more emphasized than the language itself in a CLIL program. The point is how students use language to communicate with others during the class. Researchers emphasized that language and content are not taught separately, but learners would "learn content through language, and language through content" (Davies, 2017). Also, Coyle et al. (2010) pointed

out that "learning to use language and using language to learn" (p. 10). Although Japanese university students have been studying English for at least six years, most of their time focused on learning grammar and lexical items explained in Japanese. Furthermore, students had few opportunities to produce output. In other words, extremely low English input and output reduced the opportunities to practice communication. In a CLIL program, communication "goes beyond the grammar system, but at the same time does not reject the essential role of grammar and lexis in language learning" (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 54).

In terms of language through the CLIL approach, language is approached in three ways. It is called the language triptych, which indicates the interconnection between language learning and language using. These three interrelated perspectives are "language *of* learning, language *for* learning and language *through* learning" and it requires instructors to provide opportunities for their students to practice their language skills (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 37).

Language *of* learning is mainly focuses on to providing the basic concepts and skills related to topic. Since the content can be vary, students learn the fundamental vocabulary or terminology (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 37). In other words, language *of* learning is necessary for students to make them understand the content itself.

Language *for* learning is another important aspect since in a CLIL program, the main focus is not to learn or memorize specific vocabularies or grammar points. Rather, students should communicate with others through pair work, group work, chatting, debating, and so on. Thus, students should know how to ask questions, express their thoughts, and expand the conversation. Moreover, "describing, evaluating and drawing conclusions, is essential for tasks to be carried out effectively" (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 37). Instructors and students should carefully focus on how to use those functional languages for quality learning.

These two aspects help students to acquire another language. Language *through* learning "is based on the principles that effective learning cannot take place without active involvement of language and thinking" (Coyle et al., 2010., p. 37). Then, when students express what they think and understand, they should experience a deeper level of learning, which instructors can never prepare for or predict in advance. Thus, language *for* learning is the most important skill that students should acquire in a CLIL program.

To make an effective CLIL program, more advanced cognitive skills are desired. Bloom's taxonomy, revised by Anderson and Krathwolhl is a useful tool to identify tasks. Lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) are remembering, understanding, and applying, while

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) are analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 31). Since the focus of the program is not the transfer of information or knowledge from instructors to students, both HOTS and LOTS are needed. In other words, researchers emphasized that "CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understandings and be challenged" (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 54). A study among university students in Japan indicated that more HOTS were used during their CLIL classes (Kane, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, CLIL was developed in Europe reflecting multicultural and multilingual society. *Culture* was first labeled *community*, but it was replaced with *culture* since the students typically live in multicultural societies (Ichikawa, 2015). So, the idea is to develop intercultural understanding and global awareness through the CLIL program. However, *community* might be more appropriate because students in Japan typically experience a mono-cultural and monolingual society.

Coyle et al. (2010) argues that "CLIL offers rich potential for developing notions of pluricultural citizenship and global understanding" for students (p. 55). In other words, it is obvious that learning other languages and culture would help students to develop a sense of community and recognize the importance of cross-cultural understanding and expanding students' knowledge.

CLIL approach in Baiko Gakuin University

The actual class was conducted during the first semester, 2017. The class consisted of 41 undergraduate junior students majoring in English communication and International Business communication in the literature department. English skills ranged from low to high intermediate. In this class, students learned about the international situations and related issues, history, and geographical features focusing on a map of the world. The textbook was designed for a CLIL course (Sasajima, Nakaya, Yukita, & Yamato, 2015).

During each class, students were required to work in a group of three or four. The groups were shuffled every time by the instructor. During the class, students did listening activities, online research, and presentations. Each student did at least two presentations during a class period in front of his or her assigned group members. A white board was provided to each group and students took turns to taking notes when they did listening and research activities. A presenter stood in front of a board and gave a presentation. By doing so, the other students may understand a presentation more easily since they worked

together to organize their findings.

When they listened to the audio, students were allowed to listen several times. One student in a group was assigned to take notes on the board for a first time around, and another student took notes for a second time. Then, comprehensive questions were answered and their information on the board was organized. Finally, one or two students were asked to give a short presentation about their listening followed by a brief feedback from the others.

For the research section, students were allowed to use the Internet to explore the latest information. They did research about geographical features or significant sites, and they were assigned to look for basic information. Also, they were asked to explain why the sites were significant. Like their listening activities, students worked together to organize their findings on the board. Then, students took turns giving a two-minute presentation followed by a brief feedback session from the others.

In order to encourage self-study, students were assigned to do other research about geographical features and history found in the textbook. Assignments were collected, then quizzes based on the self-study were given a week later. Quizzes were basically to answer in short sentences and briefly explain their thoughts based on the research or reading. Students wrote a short journal entry every week after class. This portfolio was collected each week, and returned to students the following week. Students were asked to write in English about their thoughts on a class / lecture or their study plan.

Students' reflection

A simple Likert questionnaire, written in Japanese, was given to students on the last day of the semester, a week after the final exam. There were six questions and students were asked to mark a – strongly agree, b – agree, c – neutral, d – disagree, or e – strongly disagree. These questions consisted of the following: 1. The contents were interesting, 2. The activity using a white board was interesting, 3. Presentation activities were interesting, 4. The online research was interesting, 5. Group or pair work was interesting, and 6. Content and activities positively affected my motivation to study English. Then, students were asked to write freely if they had further comments.

Among 41 students, 30 students came to the class and took part in a survey, and the findings were organized in table 1.

Table 1 End-of-semester Questionnaire Results of Baiko Gakuin Students' reflection (n=30)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 The contents were interesting.	6	8	11	3	2
2 The activity using a white board was interesting.	7	7	12	2	2
3 Presentation activities were interesting.	6	6	12	5	1
4 Online research was interesting.	13	8	6	2	1
5 Group or pair work was interesting.	8	7	8	6	1
6 Content and activities positively affected my motivation to study English.	8	6	11	3	2

According to students' comments, they have been learning in the class. "Using the white board was new and very interesting. It was nice to know about various countries, especially Asian countries." "It was new and impressive for me to study vocabularies through online research like researching about world heritage sites. I could learn something besides English." "Learning countries around the world was interesting since I could know something that I did not know." "My communication ability was improved throughout a group work." "I have most enjoyed participating group work (presentation). Also, it was nice to know about African countries." "It was very effective to study geographical features and English at the same time. However, without having knowledge, it was difficult to follow the class." "Compare to other classes, I had more opportunities to practice speaking." "I was able to practice using keywords, not reading sentences, to give a presentation." From these comments, it was assumed that students enjoyed the elements of CLIL approach.

Then, some of the comments indicated possible issues. For instance, one student mentioned the content level was not high enough. This student wrote, "I wanted to study more detail." Another student had more interest in Japan than other countries. This student wrote, "I wanted to study Japanese history." Then, another student mentioned, "I am bad at group work and presentation, so it was unpleasant, but it was nice to take this class." For students who do not enjoy group activities and presentation, it might be challenging for them to participate in a CLIL approach class.

Discussion

Although the study participants were only 30 out of 41 (71%), the students' reflection clearly indicated both the effectiveness and issues. Although the percentages who marked A (strongly agree) or B (agree) were not so high, 25 students (83.3%) said the content was acceptable. On the other hand, a total of 5 students (16.7%) mentioned the content was not pleasant. This outcome may be indicated that choosing the right content is a challenging thing for an effective CLIL program. Researchers claim that "the selected content and activities provided for students" would affect the effectiveness of CLIL approach (Suwannoppharat & Chinokul, 2015). However, online research was fairly preferred. In fact, 21 students (70%) seemed to enjoy the activity. This finding indicated that they have enjoyed searching authentic materials. Then, using a whiteboard as a tool was acceptable, 26 students (86.7%) marked A, B, or C, respectably.

The reflection about group work and presentation revealed possible issues. 7 students (23.3%) did not enjoy group work activities. Then, 6 students (20%) mentioned giving out presentations were uninteresting. Possible reason could be simply these students are not good at participating in group activities or in communicating with others. As found in a comment, they were students who do not want to be involved in a group work. Thus, it is challenging for both instructors and students to arrange a learning environment for everyone.

These issues cannot be ignored since an effective CLIL approach can only be effective when 4Cs are well balanced. Especially, content and communication are two major backbones in a CLIL program. In fact, "students have to work cooperatively with others, making use of each person's strengths and weaknesses, and operating effectively in groups" (Suwannoppharat & Chinokul, 2015). However, 25 students (83.3%) pointed out that the course might have a positive effect on their motivation to study English. This indicates that a CLIL approach has its potential for learning English.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the students had at least 6 years of English education. However, it is obvious that their English ability would not meet what MEXT is looking for. Researchers pointed out that one of the reasons was a lack of their opportunities to use or produce

output. Koike (2014) emphasizes that a CLIL program would provide students with an opportunity to use English meaningfully. Ironically, 4Cs framework would be an obstacle when educators try to conduct the CLIL approach since providing a suitable content would be difficult and there were students who do not want to participate in activities. However, it is obvious that this approach could be one significant way to overcome circumstances that educators and students face in Japan. Further study is needed to identify the ways to overcome these difficulties.

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