Applying the Soft CLIL Approach in a Japanese University: Identifying Opportunities

Miyafumi Higashi

Abstract: The present paper shows the opportunities and difficulties of the CLIL approach in a Japanese university. The study involved 62 English-major junior students, and it identified how the soft CLIL approach affected them. From the collected data, it was clear that significant number of students expressed positive perceptions. The learners stated that their higher-order thinking skills and motivation have been improved. However, a number of students pointed out that collaborative work could negatively influence their motivation.

Key words: content and language integrated learning (CLIL); *soft* CLIL; *hard* CLIL; higher-order thinking skills; cognitive skills; Japanese university; English language teaching; collaborative work; motivation

Introduction

Our world is changing dramatically, "there is an enormous need to innovate and create, as well as apply new and/or different ways of doing things in every aspect of life, including education" (McDougald, 2016). Thus, as the author mentioned in his previous work, it is clear that various approaches to learning English should be considered and applied for all levels of students who study English since there is no such thing as a perfect teaching approach (Higashi, 2018).

One of the language teaching approaches called *Content and Language Integrate Learning* (CLIL) is now gaining its popularity in Japan. The purpose of CLIL is to provide students with opportunities to learn both subject matter and language. In CLIL, learners experience 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 idea is to provide learning opportunities where students can use language as a tool to develop knowledge. Unlike other language teaching approaches like *Content Based*

Learning or *Immersion*, what makes CLIL unique is its four frameworks. These are "content (subject matter), communication (language learning and using), cognition (learning and thinking processes) and culture (developing intercultural understanding and global citizenship)" (Coyle et al., 2010, p.41). Authors emphasize that this is a holistic approach where these 4Cs are integrated (Coyle et al., 2010, p.53).

Soft CLIL

Since this approach integrates both language and content, there could be a dilemma when trying to describe which is stronger or weaker. *Soft CLIL* is used to explain "the broad linguistic aims that a language teacher brings to the classroom," and *hard CLIL* "refers exclusively to subject-based aims and objectives, where subjects from the conventional curriculum are taught" in another foreign language (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2016, Unit 2, location 840). In Japan, the idea is to learn English, so there is a language instructor teaching English by integrating content into classes. Thus, instructors are more sensitive to the language-learning demands from students and willing to provide support. Then, both language related and content related outcomes are in their mind (Brown, 2015).

Communication and Cognitive Skills

An effective program aims to provide meaningful interaction among participants. *Student talking time* (STT) should be increased and *teacher talking time* (TTT) should be reduced (Bentley, 2010, Unit 1, location 120). So, 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 emphasize 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" are products of CLIL (p.10). Although Japanese university students study English for at least six years, most of that time focuses on learning grammar and lexical items explained in Japanese. 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). But students in Japan may experience extremely low input in English. Furthermore, students had few opportunities for output of what they have learned that resulted in fewer opportunities to practice communication.

As the author stated in his previous work, more cognitive skills are desired to make an effective CLIL program (Higashi, 2018). Bloom's taxonomy, revised by Anderson and Krathwolhl is a useful tool to identify tasks that participants should be focused. Examples of *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. Researchers emphasized that "CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understandings and be challenged" (Coyle et al., 2010, p.54). Kane (2017) pointed out that among university students in Japan indicated that more HOTS were used during their CLIL class than in previous non-CLIL classes.

The purpose of this paper was to find out how the *soft* CLIL approach affected participants' HOTS and motivation after a semester-long course in a Japanese university.

Soft CLIL approach to English major junior students in Japan

The actual class was conducted during the first semester, 2018. The class consisted of 62 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 Global Issues by using a textbook designed for a CLIL course (Sasajima, Ikeda, Yamazaki, Chida, Fujisawa, Fukushima, Nakaya, Yukita, & Schramm, 2014). Students met once a week for 90 minutes per semester (15 weeks total).

For students to have in-depth learning, 7 topics out of 14 were selected by students. Every participant voted on 5 interesting topics and the most popular 7 topics were covered during the semester. These 7 topics were; Stereotypes and Racism, Information and Communication, Culture and Fashion, Health, Food, Endangered Species, and International Relationships. During each class, students were required to conduct collaborative activities including listening, discussion, and presentations. Every two weeks, the groups of three or four students was randomly shuffled by the instructor. Then, each student did at least two presentations during a class period in front of other group members. A white board was provided to each group and students took turns to taking notes when they did listening activities and discussion activities.

When students discussed content, they were allowed to use the Internet to explore the

latest information. They did research to find out specific information which was necessary for further discussion. Like their listening activities, students worked together to organize their findings on the board. Then, they took turns giving a short presentation followed by a brief feedback from the others. Also, students wrote a short journal entry every week after class. This portfolio was collected each week, and returned with feedback from the teacher to students the following week. Students were asked to write in English about their thoughts on a class or their study plan.

Data Collection and Results

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 19 questions and students were asked to mark a – strongly agree, b – agree, c – neutral, d – disagree, or e – strongly disagree（See table 1）. Then, students were asked to write both positive and negative aspects of collaborative work followed by other further comments if needed（See table 2）. Among 62 students, 57 students came to the class on a final day and took part in a survey.

Table 1 *End-of-semester Questionnaire Results of students' reflection*（*n=57*）

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 I like to study English.	17	21	15	3	1
2 I had a great interest in content since we have voted the topics.	20	27	7	3	0
3 I could understand instructor's English.	24	21	10	2	0
4 The English difficulty was appropriate.	6	27	19	3	2
5 The assistant intern was helpful.	30	18	8	0	1
6 I have felt that the course focused on content rather than English.	14	24	14	5	0
7 I like a pair work / group work	10	16	21	5	5
8 I have learned and remembered the content.	12	30	12	3	0
9 I am able to apply the content now.	8	20	23	4	2
10 My vocabulary and language knowledge has improved.	17	22	15	1	2

11 My ability to understand the points has improved.	16	22	17	2	0
12 My ability to think and consider has improved.	17	24	13	3	0
13 I became closer to my classmates.	8	24	21	3	1
14 My ability to express my thoughts has improved.	10	27	15	4	1
15 My motivation towards studying English has increased because I have studied content in English.	15	29	11	2	0
16 Collaborative work (group work, pair work, presentation, and etc.) positively affected on my motivation.	8	22	25	1	1
17 I would like to take CLIL approach course.	21	20	11	5	0
18 I have learned from my classmates when we did collaborative work.	18	17	15	6	1

Table 2 *End-of-semester students' comments over collaborative work*

	Merits	Demerits
19 Please write some merits and demerits about collaborative work.	• I could practice how to express myself. • I could see points from a different point of view. • Now I can talk to everyone. • It was good for me to practice English output. • It will increase a will power. • It was nice to know a new friend. • I could ask questions to my group members. • It was nice to practice presentation. • My knowledge has increased. • I could experience the importance of collaborative work. • I could cooperate with others. • It was good to practice communication. • I could double check my understanding. • I was motivated.	• It is difficult for me to do activities with someone who I do not know. • There is someone who never express his or her idea. • If we were too friendly, we just talk unrelated things. • It was difficult for me to control the group. • Sometimes, motivation was pretty low because everyone was quiet. • We were off the topic. • I could not concentrate. • I was too lazy. That kind of person easily rely on others and did nothing. • It was sometimes difficult to break the silence. • I could not talk if I did not have enough confidence.

20 Other comments	• The course was enjoyable. • My mother told me that she studied a World History class in Spanish. So, it was very informative for me to take this class. • It was nice to have a white board which was provided to a group. It was helpful when we organized our understanding. • I have earned a lot of new information.

Discussion

From the students' reflection, both the effectiveness and issues were identified clearly. 47 students (82%) said topics they chose were enjoyable. As Suwannppharat and Chinokul mentioned, it is important to select contents carefully for a better outcome (2015). Thus, throughout the semester, most participants should have felt interested in contents. Students said the English level was appropriate. Including neutral students, 96% of them said the instructor's English was understandable. Then, 91% of the students pointed out the English level was acceptable. An appropriate English level in the class allows them to focus on contents. In fact, 38 students (67%) of them pointed out that they thought course focused on content rather than English, and 42 students (74%) emphasized that they have learned and remembered information from the content. This outcome was noteworthy since the class was a *soft* CLIL. As cited in Brown, "higher proficiency students focused on the benefits of CLIL and seemed to appreciate the challenge"(2015). Thus, it may indicate that the learners should experience a *hard* CLIL class to develop their knowledge. *Hard* CLIL sounds ideal, since learners "seemed to focus on notions of authenticity and appreciate that CLIL could give them an opportunity for real language use in a way that general English classes could not"(Howard, 2015). However, it is unrealistic in Japan to conduct this type of CLIL since non-English teachers usually have not had sufficient linguistic training and the teaching materials are not adequate (Yoshihara, Takizawa, and Oyama, 2015). One way to overcome this problem is to include coordination between the language and content instructors. However, as cited in Brown, it may be common that these instructors do not communicate a lot (2015). In his writing, Mcdougald pointed out that English teachers and content teachers may feel they are "invading" each other's teaching territory (2016).

The participants have different idea towards collaborative activities. 26 students (47%)

showed their positive feeling but 31 students (54%) had a neutral to undesirable feeling, including 10 students (18%) who showed a strong negative feeling. That is why only 53% of them (30 students)said collaborative work positively affected their motivation. The positive comments were "*I could see points from a different point of view,*" "*I could ask questions to my group members,*" "*I could experience the importance of collaborative work,*" and "*I could double check my understanding*." Then, 31 students (54%) said they became closer to their classmates. There were some positive comments like "*Now I can talk to everyone*" and "*It was nice to know some new friends*."

On the other hand, negative comments include "*It is difficult for me to do activities with someone who I do not know,*" "*There is someone who never express his or her idea,*" "*Sometimes, motivation was pretty low because everyone was quiet,*" and "*It was sometimes difficult to break the silence*." These students might have had difficulties initiating and doing their collaborative assignments actively. Also, if they were too friendly, it was difficult for them to concentrate. Comments like "*If we were too friendly, we just talk unrelated things,*" "*It was difficult for me to control the group*," and "*We were off the topic*" clearly exposed the problem.

As mentioned earlier, participants should have more opportunities practicing output and using HOTS in a CLIL setting. From the questionnaires, students pointed out their ability to express their thoughts had improved (37=65%). Then, students pointed out their ability to understand the points and ability to think and consider have improved (38= 67% and 41 students=72%, respectively). Some comments include, "*I could practice how to express myself,*" "*It was good for me to practice output in English,*" "*It was nice to practice presentation,*" and "*It was good to practice communication.*" 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). 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. Language *through* learning is one of the most important skills that students should acquire in a CLIL program. A number of students may have experienced a deeper level of learning.

On the other hand, to provide a low anxiety environment and to control it is challenging for an instructor. It is obvious that a number of participants do not want to be involved in collaborative activities. They may not want to work together with others that they do not know, or they simply want to study quietly. Also, some students pointed out

that it may disrupt collaborative activities if they are too friendly. However, participants may experience higher motivation. 44 students (77%) said their motivation towards studying English had increased because they have studied content in English. Then, 41 students (72%) said they would like to take a CLIL approach class again in the future. Some positive comments include, "*It will increase a will power,*" "*I have earned a lot of new information*," and "*My mother told me that she studied a World History class in Spanish. So, it was very informative for me to take this class*."

Conclusion

Students become more autonomous if they can develop strategies for learning. Students may understand how to use available resources including their classmates. Participants can work together to understand the material. Since participants are studying content in a different language, they may experience difficulties, but they can "develop mechanisms to be able to compensate for this limitation" (Halbach, 2014).

Japanese university students usually have studied English for at least six years. However, it is obvious that their English ability would not meet what both learners and educators are targeting. Researchers pointed out that one of the reasons for this was a lack of opportunities to use or produce output. The purpose of this study was to identify possible benefits and difficulties in a *soft* CLIL approached class. Although some students do not want to participate in collaborative activities, other students showed positive feelings and attitudes for a CLIL approached class. It is obvious that this approach could be one significant way to overcome challenges that educators and students face in Japan.

References

Ball, P, Kelly, K., & Clegg, J.(2016). *Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers: Putting CLIL into Practice* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.

Bentley, K. (2010). *The TKT Course CLIL Module* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.

Brown, H. (2015). Factors influencing the choice of CLIL classes at university in Japan. *English Language Teaching World Online*, April, 1–22.

Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, M. J. (2017). The Case for Increasing CLIL in Japanese Universities. 立命館大学国際言語文化研究所, 28, 195–205.

Halbach, A. (2014). Teaching (in) the foreign language in a CLIL context: Towards a new approach. Utrecht Studies in Language and Communication; Leiden. 28, 1–14

Higashi, M. (2018). Applying CLIL Approach to English Teaching in a Japanese University.

Bulletin of Baiko Gakuin University, 51. 27-34.

Howard, B. (2015). Factors Influencing the Choice of CLIL Classes at University in Japan. *ELTWorldOnline.com*, 1-22.

McDougald, J. S. (2016). CLIL Approaches in Education: Opportunities, Challenges, or Threats? *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning, 9*(2), 253-266.

Sasajima, S., Ikeda, M., Yamazaki, M., Chida, T., Fujisawa, S., Fukushima, J., Nakaya, M., Yukita, M., & Schramm, A. (2014). CLIL Global Issues., Tokyo: Sanshusha.

Yoshihara, R., Takizawa, H., & Oyama, K. (2015). Students' Perceptions of CLIL and Topics in EFL University Classrooms. *総合文化研究第 21 巻第 1 号*, 19-37.