

Incorporating the Elements of Fiction Into a CLIL-Based Extensive Reading Course

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Abstract

Within a course at a Japanese university based wholly on extensive reading, the authors of this paper implemented the pedagogical framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to improve its effectiveness (Peragine & Mattson, 2023). A course outline was designed by incorporating literary devices or elements of fiction as the main content of the course, and students utilized this content within in-class activities to analyze and explicate their self-selected graded readers. The CLIL approach is briefly explained, along with the “content vs. language” balance educators must strike within such courses, and the nature of that balance within this course. An outline of literary concepts is given, along with a summary of each lesson’s activities. Feedback from students is summarized, in which they explained which literary elements, activities, and aspects of the course were perceived to be the most useful. The paper ends with conclusions drawn from students’ feedback regarding topics of interest and of the positive benefits for students of this CLIL-centered method, including a better appreciation of literature as well as improvements in writing about and discussing literature.

Keywords: *Pleasure reading, Extensive reading, Graded readers, EFL, CLIL*

Introduction

Extensive reading often plays a supporting role in L2 reading-based courses. However, within the Independent Module at Rikkyo University, there exists a unique elective course, Pleasure Reading, based entirely on extensive reading as a means of helping students improve their reading fluency through the use of level-appropriate materials that they select for themselves. By empowering students to choose what they read, it is hoped that it will make for a more pleasurable experience, thereby fostering reading as a habit. To facilitate the objectives of the course, students engage in activities such as sustained silent reading, small-group book discussions, and written and/or oral assignments that both summarize and analyze students’ self-selected reading materials.

In a previous paper, the authors set out to apply the principles of Content and Language

Integrated Learning (CLIL) to the Pleasure Reading course, providing a detailed explanation of the pedagogical methodology for a lesson and handout regarding the topic of literary genres (Peragine & Mattson, 2023). Using this CLIL-based framework, the authors' created a curriculum aimed at enhancing the overall pleasure aspect of reading by introducing tools for literary analysis so that students could better interpret the books they were reading. This resulted in more academic discussions and an enhanced feeling of satisfaction by students at having not only completed a book in a second language but also having gained the ability to provide in-depth explanations as to what made each text noteworthy.

A brief overview and definition of CLIL are appropriate at this point, but laying out a singular, canonical definition is difficult. The history of CLIL can be traced back to 1990s Europe, where it was used to facilitate multilingualism, address the language–content imbalance in foreign language teaching, and offer students a more integrated approach to learning (Marsh, 2002). CLIL has since evolved and expanded with various definitions and models proposed. Llinares et al. (2012) state there are differences in approaches to CLIL depending upon myriad factors, including language of instruction, teacher objectives, starting age, teaching materials, language objectives, and research. Similarly, Mehisto et al. (2008) believe CLIL to be an umbrella term covering a dozen or more educational approaches. Despite the overlapping definitions, Marsh (2002) describes CLIL as “any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content” (p. 15), and Coyle et al. (2010) further elaborate 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” (p. 1).

A core tenet of CLIL coursework is the “four Cs – content, cognition, communication, and cultural awareness” (Coyle, 1999, p. 53). The pedagogical focus of this paper is on content, which serves as the foundation for the other three aspects. Coyle (1999) suggests that “it is through progression in the knowledge, skills and understanding of the content, by engagement in associated cognitive processing, interaction in the communicative context, and a deepening awareness of cultural self and otherness, that learning takes place” (p. 53). Although these four aspects are deeply intertwined, Coyle (2005) points out that content, or “thematic learning,” is still “at the heart of the learning process” (p. 5). Therefore, it is beneficial for CLIL educators to conduct a “curriculum subject audit” to identify the specific content-related skills, knowledge, and comprehension that need to be imparted (Coyle, 1999, p. 60). Equating content with progression serves as a reminder that strategic planning is necessary for both scaffolded learning within individual lessons as well as to enhance the logical progression of the topics to be presented throughout the course.

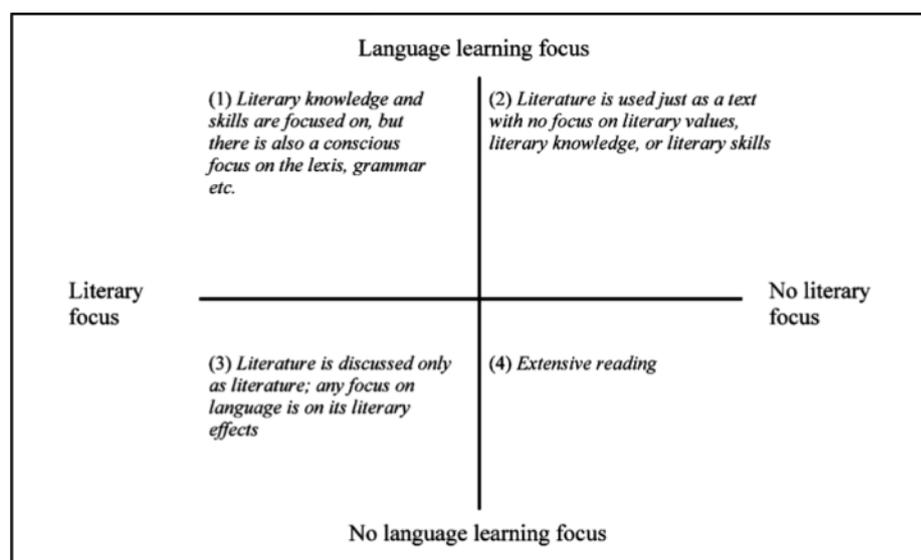
The primary content for this Pleasure Reading course was the elements of fiction and literary devices, and students were expected to use their understanding of these concepts to participate in discussion-based and written activities to help them break down their self-selected texts in a more meaningful way. As such, lesson themes progressed in terms of difficulty, starting with more conceptually approachable topics such as genres, setting, and characters before moving onward to more challenging topics such as plot, point of view, conflict, and symbolism. Student assessment was based on each student's understanding, application, and analysis of their graded readers through the lens of these literary devices.

As elements of fiction and literary devices constituted the main content of the course, they became the foundation for all discussions, presentations, and written assignments.

Another characteristic of this course was the focus on literary content rather than simply on language learning, the latter of which is more conventional at Japanese universities. According to Paran (2008), “There has been a move towards integrating language and literature” (p. 466). Paran provides a simple model (Figure 1) showing the range in which a course teaching language and/or literature might fall within a spectrum: the degree to which there is a strong literary focus (horizontal axis) and language learning focus (vertical axis). Based on Paran’s model, the implementation of CLIL with a focus on the teaching of literary analysis skills brings this course from being that of extensive reading (see Quadrant 4) to a course with both a clear literary and language learning focus (see Quadrant 1), thereby distinguishing it from standard L1 Literature courses (see Quadrant 3) that interpret texts through the lens of traditional literary criticism.

Figure 1

The Intersection of Literature and Language Teaching



Note. Adapted from *The Role of Literature in Instructed Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: An Evidence-Based Survey*, by Paran, 2008, p.466.

Within this CLIL-based framework, students gain the confidence to engage in in-depth discussions of various works of adapted literature with an understanding of the concepts and corresponding language necessary to participate in the collective act of scholarly interpretation using their L2. Therefore, it was the authors’ beliefs that incorporating such content would enhance the activity of extensive reading, taking it from simply reading in isolation with the purpose of improving fluency to a more fully engaging form of reasoning that stimulates cognition and critical thinking that will serve students well, both in and out of the classroom.

A Literary Analysis-Based Outline of Course Content

The first lesson began with a certain amount of housekeeping, so to speak, mainly an introduction to the course content, an explanation of the benefits of extensive reading, a reading-level test from Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF; <https://erfpt.ealps.shinshu-u.ac.jp/>), information about accessing graded readers as well as recording student progress with a reading record, and various icebreakers that focus on building a comfortable class atmosphere while allowing students to discuss materials they enjoy reading in both English and their native language. The students were told that their book selection should be based on the difficulty level: no more than three unknown words per page was the main criterion for choosing, and by keeping the difficulty relatively low, the idea was to improve reading speed, comprehension, and enjoyment. For homework, students were required to find their first self-selected book. Although students were free to choose for themselves, they were strongly encouraged to read works of fiction as this would allow them to apply what they learn in later lessons to the books they have selected. If time permitted, the teachers accompanied students to the library to help them locate suitable reading materials.

Genres

This lesson began with the teacher checking that all students came to class with a book to read. Students were introduced to the concept of previewing, which helped students get some idea about their books before actually having read them. To hone these skills, students viewed a movie poster for a then-unreleased Pixar film, making predictions about it using wh- questions. They then viewed the movie's teaser trailer to confirm their predictions and make new ones. Finally, they use these skills to preview their graded readers, asking questions such as "What is the title of your book? Who is the author? Is he/she famous? If so, what for? When was the story written? When/Where does the story take place? What do you think the story is about? Why did you choose the book? What do you think the characters are like?" After discussing these questions, it was expected that students would be sufficiently motivated to engage in sustained silent reading (SSR) and were given 15 minutes to read their graded readers in class. Then, the students read and completed a graphic organizer to learn about the key features of four literary genres: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama (Peragine & Mattson, 2023). A series of scaffolded activities followed with the aim of further providing the language for students to both discuss their favorite genres while also assessing the genre of their graded readers. If time permitted, the lesson concluded with a second session of SSR. Typically, students were provided two SSR sessions per lesson with the goal of facilitating regular reading habits.

Setting

The second literary concept taught was setting. The time and place of a story can be integral, so students were encouraged to ask questions like "What is the time period in which the story takes place? Where does the story take place? What is the social or cultural context of the setting? What are the customs, beliefs, and values of the characters in relation to the setting? How does the setting affect the characters and events in the story? Does the setting

impact the mood of the story?” Students were shown clips from different genres of film to show how the setting can vary greatly. Although this was a reading course, film clips were often used to visually exemplify many of the literary elements. Through graphic organizers, students applied these questions to their graded readers. In a culminating activity, students were shown various illustrations and—using their knowledge of setting—collaborated to create the setting of an invented story.

Character

The concept of character is arguably the most important literary aspect of fiction. Students had to consider the difference between main and supporting characters; what it means to call a character flat, round, static, or dynamic; and the distinction between protagonists and antagonists. By applying these ideas to their graded readers, students had tools that allowed them to delve more deeply into their stories and discuss and write about the characters more fully. Students used graphic organizers in class to apply these concepts to characters that most were likely familiar with, describing attributes of characters such as those in *Doraemon* and the *Harry Potter* series. Once they understood the concepts, students were shown a visual cue, such as an illustration, and they collaborated with other students to create their own characters, applying the new concepts.

Plot

By focusing on plot, students could better organize and understand the underlying structure of their graded reader. Plot is an essential element of fiction and helps readers comprehend the story’s structure and organization (Leki & Carson, 1997), and this can aid students in understanding how the story unfolds and progresses, as well as the relationships between the story’s events and characters. By using graphic organizers, students applied the stages of plot—such as exposition, climax, and denouement—to well-known stories as well as their own graded readers. Students also engaged in creative writing with visual prompts and created their own short stories.

Point of View

The literary point of view involves the perspective from which a story is told, including the use of first, second, and third person pronouns; the use of unreliable narrators; and various types of narrators, such as objective, limited, and omniscient. Understanding point of view can also aid students in comprehending and analyzing literary texts by influencing how readers perceive characters, events, and themes in a story. Exploring different points of view helped students critically evaluate the biases and motivations of different characters and explore how the author’s own perspective influences the story. Students engaged with “Choose Your Own Adventure” graded readers from Atama-ii Books that used the second person, a rarely used point of view that was novel for many students.

Theme/Conflict

Themes and conflicts in stories can be useful for enhancing students’ language and critical thinking skills. Themes are the underlying messages or ideas that are conveyed

through a story, such as love, good vs. evil, and revenge. By analyzing themes, students gained a deeper understanding of cultural values and beliefs. Conflicts are the obstacles or challenges that the characters face in achieving their goals, and students were introduced to six types of conflict (including person vs. person, person vs. nature, etc.) and encouraged to apply that framework to their own reading and discuss how each relates to their own lives and experiences. Through analyzing conflicts, students could learn to express empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives and situations.

Symbolism

Symbolism allows the reader to interpret the meaning of an object or action in a story beyond its literal interpretation. The lesson began with scaffolding, starting with easily interpreted symbols such as local signs and flags before moving onto more abstract symbols such as numbers, colors, and flowers with an emphasis on varying cultural interpretations, thereby reinforcing the role of perspective on interpretation. Literary examples include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, where the large bespectacled eyes on an old billboard symbolize the eyes of God, watching over everyone. Other forms of symbolic representation were introduced, namely similes, metaphors, and allegories. By learning and applying symbolism with graphic organizers, students could better understand how authors convey deeper, more layered meanings and enhance the overall impact of the story.

Word Choice and Language

A lesson that came the closest to explicit language teaching involved the teaching of an author's language and vocabulary choice, and how those choices inform and reflect the other aspects such as theme and character. The word choices that an author makes create the "voice" of the book, making it (in theory, at least) distinct from other works; that voice can extend to other aspects, such as character and plot. The students were given examples of alliteration and rhythm, of how aesthetically pleasing sentences can be made with clarity and rhythm. Students were then assigned to create their own poems and sentences with an online magnetic poetry website. With a set of simple words, students worked collaboratively while applying these concepts to create and share their own poems.

Methodology

As the authors utilized a range of experimental methods to teach literary analysis skills, it was important to find out directly from students their perceptions of the lessons' contents and their influence on extensive reading. Being that this is an elective course, the participants included university sophomores, juniors, and seniors with ERF reading levels ranging from 3.7 (high beginner) to 13.8 (early advanced), which corresponds to Yomiyasusa levels of 0.7 to 5.8 and Common European Framework of Reference levels of A1 to C1. At the start of the semester, students were asked for their permission regarding the collection of verbal and written feedback through the observation of in-class discussions, interviews, and reaction papers. All students in two classes ($N = 44$) agreed to participate. It is worth noting that this was an informal survey of students' reactions, meaning that students were not asked to

complete a formal survey with Likert scales. Instead, students were asked near the end of the course to write freely about their opinions on a range of topics including but not limited to the following: most useful/interesting lessons, memorable activities, the class’s effect on reading habits, future goals concerning extensive reading, and suggestions to improve the class. The authors then conducted a qualitative content analysis of these responses, focusing on the frequency of students commenting on a perceived reading level improvement, increased motivation to read in English, or endorsement of the benefits of applying literary analysis to their graded readers. Moreover, references to students’ interest in lesson themes and corresponding activities were also tallied in hopes of determining which topics were favorably viewed.

Results

The results of the qualitative content analysis were compiled along with student quotes that represented each of these ideas.

Table 1

General Feedback About the Course (N = 44)

Student Comment	Teacher A	Teacher B	Total
Improved Reading Level	4	2	6
Motivation to Read in English Increased	12	14	26
Literary Analysis was Beneficial	10	9	19

Overall, students responded positively to the prompts (Table 1). Although students rarely commented on improvements to their reading level, they frequently reported an increase in motivation due to having the freedom to choose their own reading materials, which was described by one student who said, “Due to the freedom, I was very encouraged to read books of new genres I’ve never read before.” Moreover, the ease of finding graded readers at their level was another common reason for increased motivation as aptly explained by another student:

I think this class had a great impact on my way of thinking about reading in English. This is because each student was able to choose a book that suited his or her own level, so I did not fall behind because of difficulty. Therefore, I was able to read books with the same amount of stress as when reading Japanese books.

Although extensive reading was often cited as the impetus for increased motivation, several students also reported that activities teaching literary analysis had a positive impact, which is explained in the following comments:

Through this Pleasure Reading class, we were able to not only read books in English, but also think about them through various themes such as genre, setting, character,

plot, point of view, conflict, word choice, language, symbolism, chronology, and comparison with your life. By reading through these themes, I was able to consider things from a perspective I could not have before, and made new discoveries with an awareness of things I would not have noticed before.

Before taking this class, I had just been reading. However, after taking this class, I can read using a lot of knowledge. I am now able to think about the feelings of the characters, considering the place, the time period and the surroundings in which they are in, and I am able to enjoy the features of the authors' styles of writing.

As indicated by such comments, introducing content that helped students better analyze their books fostered a deeper appreciation of the stories they were reading, which in turn helped them support their opinions more coherently both in writing and in discussions. Furthermore, by tallying the frequency of student comments referring to certain lessons and activities as being interesting or memorable (Table 2), it becomes clearer as to the topics and skills that students believe to be most beneficial.

Table 2

Lesson-Specific Feedback About the Course (N = 44)

The Most Interesting Lesson/Memorable Activity	Teacher A	Teacher B	Total
Genres	3	1	4
Setting	2	3	5
Characters	4	2	6
Plot/Creative Writing	7	4	11
Point of View/Choose Your Own Adventure	10	10	20
Theme/Conflict	2	1	3
Symbolism	11	12	23
Word Choice and Language	3	3	6

Based on responses, 23 students thought symbolism was the most significant topic, and for 20 students, the most significant topic was point of view. Symbolism was often described as something that had gone unnoticed but useful for interpreting the subtle themes within their stories, for example:

Of all the lesson's themes, I found symbolism the most interesting. I had read English books without noticing symbols, so I did not notice the author's intention, which might be key signals for predicting the ending and understanding the situation well... By learning how symbols work in literature, I was able to predict and notice what the author meant, which made my reading activity more interesting.

Students also mentioned finding practical applications for analyzing symbolism in films,

TV dramas, commercials, Japanese novels, other English Literature courses, and even for their club activities, for example: “I belong to the English Drama Club. I am making costumes for casts there. The meaning of color is important to represent the personality of the role, so I thought I should learn more about symbolism.” Students also commented on the benefit of symbolism concerning cultural perspectives, for example:

For me, the class on symbolism was the most interesting. I learned that each person has their own feelings and thoughts of symbolism. For example, when we Japanese think of cherry blossoms, we associate them with the entrance ceremony and feel that they are a symbol of renewal. However, people from other countries tend to think of other symbols when they think of cherry blossoms, so I felt the change in my own stereotypes.

Like symbolism, students also regularly referenced having gained a newfound awareness of the narrative point of view and its effect on the stories, and again expressed benefits that extended beyond the classroom, for example:

The most interesting theme was Point of View because until this class I didn't care about something such as omniscience. I thought that if you care about point of view in books and life, it will be likely to improve both reading skills and life.

I read a novel quite often but I have never paid attention to the Narrator/Point of View. It was especially interesting to know the point of view is related to the plot because of the limitation of the amount of information. If a story is told in first person, readers also are able to know only what the narrator knows. In addition to that, I have never had a perspective of whether a narrator is reliable or not. So, I have never doubted the narrator of a novel and have understood what the narrator says directly. But, I started to think deeply of what the narrator says and see if he has some kind of prejudice or bias toward things.

I find it most interesting that the point of view of storytelling gives the readers different impressions about the story. For example, first person offers sympathy for the protagonist and at the same time it limits the readers' understanding of other characters. Therefore, people can be aware of the bias for reading a story by knowing which perspective of storytelling the author uses. This knowledge lets me enjoy reading books from different perspectives.

Although both symbolism and point of view were the most frequently mentioned literary skills, it is worth highlighting that all of the aforementioned topics received comments with a similar level of depth, emphasizing the benefits of empowering students with the content and language necessary to analyze their self-selected graded readers. This idea was expressed well by one student who eloquently extols the virtues of this style of extensive reading course:

I used to just read without thinking, but through this class, I have learned to pay attention to details such as introduction, climax, story closure, atmosphere, and characterization, which has broadened my perspective and made me enjoy reading many times more than before. I never knew how much fun it is to read English at my own pace, slowly, unlike a test.

By giving students the freedom to choose their own level-appropriate books while arming them with the concepts needed to interpret these works for themselves, students can come away with a newfound appreciation for reading in a second language.

Discussion

Based on the feedback from students, the authors conclude that teaching literary concepts in a CLIL-based extensive reading course was an effective method of organizing its contents. Although the authors observed a steady improvement within in-class discussions in terms of the students' ability to analyze their graded readers using the concepts and language introduced in class, it was reassuring to hear from students directly that they also found these literary tools useful. By providing students with the necessary content knowledge skills to comprehend works of adapted fiction, they could not only gain a deeper appreciation of literature but also explain in their L2 the complex thoughts and feelings they may have while reading.

Through the focused teaching of content (literary devices), students were able to view literature through a different lens and broaden their understanding. To reiterate a few examples, the lessons on symbolism and point of view were frequently mentioned as effective in getting students to change their perception of literary works. Indeed, several student comments mentioned a kind of division in their thinking of literature; before the class, they had a narrower perspective of books and reading, but it had expanded by the end of the course. They wrote of “new discoveries” and an “awareness of things” not previously noticed, as well as new ways of thinking (cognition) about literary devices. In terms of the four Cs of CLIL, students remarked on the content of the lessons they liked as well as the cognitive aspects, but there were comparatively few comments regarding communication or culture. Based on the nature of the informal survey questions, it follows that students would focus on content. As reading is a solitary activity, it also follows that communication—namely in-class discussions—may not be as memorable. A common thread from students is that the most effective aspects of the course involved self-discovery: activities that introduced new ways of thinking about books and reading. Though it may be unclear whether these discoveries were achieved through discussion or independent self-reflection, it can be said that the content taught in the Pleasure Reading course achieved its purpose of providing a progression of knowledge that both engaged students and facilitated cognition when applied to students' self-selected graded readers.

Conclusion

Our conclusions relied heavily on qualitative data with questions that focused on the aspects of the course that students found pleasurable. Although the data gives a general indication of students' perception of the course content, a more formal survey would be necessary to draw definitive conclusions about these lessons and activities. In future iterations of the course, it would be useful to implement a more detailed survey that allows students to respond to each of the lessons and its contents individually. For instance, although many students referred to memorable activities within the symbolism and point of view lessons, their comments do not indicate any aspects of these lessons that could be improved. Conversely, a lack of comments on topics such as genres, setting, and characters may not necessarily indicate that students found these lessons to lack significance nor imply abandoning these themes entirely, for these are the foundation upon which the latter topics are built. However, efforts could be made to incorporate more dynamic and memorable activities in hopes of fostering an appreciation of such topics. Furthermore, students rarely mentioned perceived improvements to their reading level, so it may be worth re-administering the reading-level test at the end of the course to determine whether such gains occurred. By giving students the opportunity to measure their own progress in terms of reading fluency and contribute regular topic-specific feedback to instructors, such data could be used to further enhance the overall development of the course.

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