Assessing a Hard-CLIL Course Through Student Presentations

Kevin Thomas

Abstract

Following previous research by the author (Thomas, 2023), in which a hard-CLIL approach to a Lecture and Discussion course was chosen. This paper concerns how assessment can be done during such courses. When using hard-CLIL, there has been debate over whether language should be considered in assessment. There is consensus that it should, but there are no guidelines on how much it should contribute to final grades. The course was institutionally required to include a final summative assessment. A 20-minute spoken presentation was decided on as the medium of this assessment. The presentation was assessed using a content (80%) language (20%) breakdown. A rubric was created as a measurement tool and was given to students to help them prepare for the assessment. Following the assessment, students were interviewed about the speaking assessment in terms of its relevance to their learning goals, the choice of presentation as assessment medium, and its perceived fairness in measuring student performance. Students were approving of the assessment method in all respects. The paper concludes with the suggestion that assessment criteria may need to be changed if teaching students with a different context. It is also recommended that further research can be done into how formative assessment throughout the course could aid students in their final speaking assessment.

Keywords: *CLIL, Assessment, Rubric, Presentations*

Introduction

The author was assigned a Lecture and Discussion course at Rikkyo University. The course consisted of two 100-minute classes, conducted over 14 weeks. The course was repeated three times, over three years. British music and social change were chosen as the theme for the course and it was decided that a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach be taken. Sato (2023) suggests "the CLIL approach considers language as a vehicle for understanding and expressing content and does not restrict the object of interest to either L2 proficiency or content knowledge" (p. 353). In other words, language is taught in CLIL classes not for its own sake, but to enable learners to understand and express content knowledge. CLIL

has been argued to not be a defined pedagogy, but an approach that allows course designers to adjust the balance between content and language according to student's language levels and needs (Coyle et al., 2010). An approach focused more on content, can be defined as "hard" CLIL, while an approach focused more on language is defined as "soft" CLIL (Ohmori, 2014).

The author chose a hard CLIL approach and designed the course with reference to CLIL's theoretical underpinnings, The 4Cs and The Language Triptych. The course was assessed through a presentation in which students were graded completely on their knowledge and explanation of content. This was decided as students had taken numerous language-based courses at Rikkyo University, and was thought to be motivating. During the first two years of the course, research was done into students' perspectives on the "hard" approach to CLIL and how it related to their reasons for taking the course. The research concluded by suggesting the approach to course design was justified, but further research needed to be done into how such hard-CLIL courses should be assessed (Thomas, 2023). It was decided that the findings of this research should inform the assessment of the 3rd cohort of students.

It has been claimed "Assessment is one the most controversial areas in CLIL mainly due to the lack of guidelines, the treatment of language aspects, and the difficulty of finding assessment tools" (Otto, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, it was decided that student perspectives on the assessment tool should be sought post-assessment to ascertain whether the assessment was deemed fair and cohesive with their learning goals.

CLIL and Assessment

It has been argued that the uniqueness of CLIL courses is their focus on content delivery and it has been debated whether language ability should contribute to students' grades (Morton, 2019). However, it has been contended that if language is not assessed, learners will not be motivated to improve their language which may lead to students being unable to comprehensibly communicate content (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012). Morton (2019) warns against putting too much weight on language competence warning "we may be unfairly penalising those students who understand the content very well but have numerous 'surface' errors in their writing or speaking" (p. 13). There is general agreement that as in course design, both language and content need to be present in CLIL assessment, and that these elements can be assessed separately or through integrated assessment (Kavanagh, 2019).

Assessment can be divided into formative and summative. Formative assessment is done throughout a course at regular intervals and is used to help learners recognise and improve weaknesses in language ability and content knowledge (Otto, 2017). Summative assessment is done at the end of the course for assigning grades. Content and language can be assessed separately for formative assessment but should both be present in summative assessment reflecting the design of the course (Sato, 2023). Integrated summative assessment methods include written essays and class presentations.

It has been suggested than summative assessment can provide formative help for students if assessment criteria is given to students in advance (Ulker, 2017). Yamamoto and Nitta (2021) suggest one way of doing this is giving detailed rubrics to students, they argue rubrics "make it easier for students to set clear goals and objectives and support student self-evaluation" (p. 131). Rubrics can contain determiners of language ability and content related higher-order thinking skills which students should display to obtain a certain grade.

Assessment Design

Assessment criteria for the lecture and discussion course was set by the university with a breakdown between, active participation (30%), classwork and homework (40%) and final assessment (30%). The final assessment component is discussed in this paper. A hard-CLIL approach was taken to the class which was positively evaluated by the first two cohorts of students. Approval was based on student's reasons for taking the course and their learning needs (Thomas, 2023). The final completely content-based assessment was conducted at the end of the course and students were not given post-assessment feedback on how to improve performance. It could therefore be considered to be summative assessment which is mainly used to assess content (Morton, 2019). Performance tasks such as presentations have been seen as suitable for summative assessment (Otto, 2017), providing a more "real-world" task (Morton, 2019, p. 15) in line with CLIL's goal of providing an authentic learning experience. Presentations were used for the first 2 cohorts of students; therefore a new assessment method did not need to be created for the 3rd cohort. However, a measurement tool for the speaking assessment needed to be made including both language and content elements widely believed to be necessary for effective and fair CLIL assessment (Kavanagh, 2021).

The speaking assessment for the course consisted of students giving a 20-minute presentation on a course-related theme. Students had all taken a presentation course in the past, so had learnt language and skills necessary for such an assessment. The content of the presentation could involve detailing the history of a band, describing a musical movement, a trend in music or an exploration of how music has been used in an attempt to achieve social change. These themes were explored in the lecture portions of the course. Students were required in their presentations to include discussion of an appropriate topic, display evidence of research and depth of content comprehension, and create slides including examples of the music under discussion. The final grade would be based on language ability (20%) and content knowledge and explanation of content knowledge (80%), reflecting the language and content balance of the course.

A rubric was created, rubrics "divide the learning objectives into different sub-categories (...) and also specify different levels of performance (...) Each level needs to have a descriptor which clearly describes what performance at that level looks like" (Morton, 2019, p. 17). Rubrics can be newly created or adapted from existing ones, for example Yamamoto and Nitta

(2021) adapted CEFR descriptors when designing CLIL courses. The author chose to adapt the IELTS test speaking rubric due to his familiarity with the rubric and growing awareness of the rubric in Japan. There has been a government initiative to encourage taking of the test (Golder et al., 2012) and the test is increasingly being used as a university entrance exam (Iwashita et al., 2021). The rubric was given to the class four weeks before they were assessed.

Figure 1

Speaking Assessment Rubric

	Language		Content			
	Grammar (10%)	Pronunciation (10%)	Topic Appropriacy (20%)	Evidence of Research (20%)	Depth of Understanding (20%)	Materials and Slides (20%)
S	Grammar mistakes cause no difficulty of understanding	Pron issues cause no difficulty of understanding	Topic is fully appropriate to the course. A music movement is discussed in a clear social context	Evidence of significant research shown. Wide range of appropriate terminology skilfully used	Presenter displays deep understanding of topic	Slides very informative. Materials help illustrate both music topic and social context
A	Grammar mistakes very occasionally make the presentation difficult to understand	Pron issues very occasionally make the presentation difficult to understand	The topic is appropriate although musical or social aspect may be less developed	Topic is appropriately researched. Use of terminology allows full understanding of issues discussed.	Presenter shows significant understanding of topic	Slides very informative. Materials help illustrate music topic or social context
B	Grammar mistakes sometimes make the presentation difficult to understand	Pron issues sometimes make the presentation difficult to understand	Topic is appropriate, although social or musical aspect may be superficial	Research from variety of sources shown. Topic related terminology used to give general understanding of topic	Presenter shows reasonable understanding of topic.	Slides informative. Materials clearly related to topic and help illustrate music topic or social context
C	Grammar mistakes often make the presentation difficult to understand	Pron issues often make the presentation difficult to understand	Topic is somewhat related to the course.	Some research shown. Some topic specific terminology used	Presenter shows some understanding of topic	Slides provide some information. Materials loosely related to topic.
D	Grammar mistakes make the presentation very difficult to understand	Pron issues make the presentation very difficult to understand	Topic is unrelated to the course	Little evidence of research shown. Terminology unable to convey meaning of the topic	Presenter shows little or no understanding of topic	No or very limited materials and slides

Research Questions and Methodology

It was deemed that research should be done into students' perspectives on the hard-CLIL inspired approach to course design and the perceived helpfulness of the rubric. Research results would be used to inform the designing of future courses. The research was conducted to ascertain, 1. If the balance of the speaking assessment reflected students' reasons for taking the course. 2. If a presentation is deemed to be a fair speaking assessment tool to measure course performance 3. If the breakdown between content and language detailed in the rubric was a fair assessment of course performance.

The qualitative approach of a group interview was used as they allow students to explain why they have certain perceptions and to react to other students. The three students in the class were interviewed for 20-minutes during the course reflection part of the final lesson. Ethical approval was provided according to institutional procedures.

Results and Discussion

The students interviewed will be referred to as students 1, 2 and 3. When asked about their reasons for taking the course, student 1 said "I'm really interested about British rock music (...) also, I want to improve language skills." They gave their preferred breakdown as "70% content and 40% language." Student 2 said "I wanted to continue to talk to others in English (...) Of course, I like music" while student 3 said "I am curious about the topics of the course. I wanted to improve listening and speaking." In summary, two students identified content as their main reason for taking the course but said they also had language learning motivations. One student expressed their reason for joining the course as mainly language acquisition-based but expressed an interest in content. These comments arguable justify integrating content and language in the speaking assessment as it reflects their goals for taking the course.

Concerning whether a presentation was seen as a fair method of assessing course performance, student 2 said "Presentation is a really good way (...) we are trained how to explain music (...) our language skills improve." This was taken to mean that the student through explaining the content they had learned that they could improve language proficiency. Student 1 said "We can choose what [music related topic] we like. We can enjoy to prepare (...) it's really good for students." This student thought the presentation was a good assessment tool as it allowed them to focus on the content that interested them, reflecting their content-related reasons for taking the course. Student 3 said they agreed with what the others had said and added that the 20-minute duration of the test was "not too long and not too short, good way."

When questioned whether the breakdown of content and language detailed on the rubric was a fair assessment of course performance, student 2 said "I think the balance is the best, [the rubric] helped me prepare." Student 3 added "I think it is fair, it is the right thing to assess grammar skill [in addition to content] made me take care of grammar." Student 3's comment

illustrated the motivating effect of including language criteria in assessment. Student 1 said "I learned presentation and debate. We already know such a good balance. Some people want to improve English, so they want you to assess language skills" This was taken to mean students already had language skills from previous courses and didn't think this should be the focus of assessment. However, language should be assessed as it motivates those who want to improve their language skills.

Overall, it seems the speaking assessment was related to students' learning goals and therefore would make the course meaningful to students. The use of a presentation as a measurement tool of course performance was seen as fair, with students indicating that it gave them the chance to focus on content of interest while motivating them to use language well. The breakdown between content and language indicated in the rubric was also seen to be fair with students saying the inclusion of language assessment was motivating, and one student saying the rubric helped them prepare.

Conclusion

This paper detailed choices made in the design of a summative speaking assessment for a class taking a hard-CLIL approach. Students showed satisfaction with the choices made around assessment. The approach while suitable to students in the class concerned may need to be adapted in different contexts. Lower-level students may need more language help and a soft-CLIL approach may be more suitable. If this were the case, the speaking assessment criteria may need to be more language-weighted to accurately measure what has been taught throughout the course. The students detailed in this paper were previously taught presentation skills, allowing them to combine what was taught with the previous language. If this were not the case, students may need to be taught presentation skills and assessment may need to be adjusted to motivate students to display these taught skills.

The final speaking assessment discussed in this paper accounted for 30% of student's final grade. Further research needs to be done into how the remaining 70% could be effectively assessed. Formative feedback was given informally to aid language learning and content comprehension during class participation and on class and homework tasks. However, this could be done more formally, an investigation of formative assessment may contribute to improvement of the course.

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