【Teaching Practice Report】

Using CLIL to Design Elective University Courses

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Abstract

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has become increasingly popular worldwide over the last few decades. It is generally described as teaching content in a language not native to the learners. In this paper, I provide a report on how I used the principles of CLIL to design two university elective courses. Using content-related vocabulary and a combination of authentic and original materials, the courses were designed to provide students with the opportunity to explore content while speaking, writing, reading, and listening to English. Activities were designed to support students with low-level English proficiency commonly found in these mixed-level classes as well as provide students of all English proficiency levels interesting and meaningful interactions with the course theme, lesson topics, and other students. First, I briefly explain some of the CLIL-related theories on which I based many of my course design and classroom interaction decisions. Then, I outline the syllabus and lesson plans for the two courses. I conclude the report with some informal classroom observations and recommendations for incorporating CLIL into university elective courses.

Keywords: Content and language integrated learning; CLIL; elective courses

Introduction

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is an educational approach where a non-language content course is taught in a language generally different from the learners' first (Coyle *et al.,* 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011). CLIL does not necessarily require an equal division of subject and language education; instead, it is an interwoven fusion between the two (Coyle *et al.,* 2010). CLIL is generally associated with bilingual education and content-based instruction. Focus on implementing CLIL in the classroom and subsequent studies on CLIL emerged from European countries in the mid-1990s (Coyle *et al.,* 2010; Nikula *et al.*, 2016). Soon after, CLIL began spreading worldwide (Coyle *et al.,* 2010; Graham *et al.*, 2018). Some common characteristics of CLIL education in Asia, as well as other parts of the world, are that the target language is generally English, and the content is generally given more emphasis as the teachers tend to be non-native English speakers teaching their subjects of expertise, with additional language lessons provided by language experts (Dalton-Puffer, 2011).

However, that does not mean that language in CLIL classrooms is completely ignored. In fact, just as CLIL is a union between content and language education, so too is the support that CLIL teachers provide. With regard to support in a CLIL environment, teachers utilize several strategies. One common strategy is scaffolding, the process of experts providing novices with support to accomplish tasks beyond their abilities (Bruner, 1976, as cited in Lyster, 2007). Mahan (2022) created a framework from some of the existing literature on CLIL for analyzing scaffolding in CLIL classrooms. They settled on three aspects of scaffolding: prior knowledge, supporting materials, and academic language. In their study, they found that content teachers in the natural sciences, geography, and social sciences use a variety of scaffolding strategies such as activating students' prior knowledge, supplying supporting materials, and giving academic language prompts for understanding content and accomplishing tasks. In terms of strategies used for error correction,

recasting is a common and often preferred practice. Recasting involves repeating a student's erroneous utterances using the correct grammar and vocabulary in the hopes that the student will notice the difference (Lyster, 2007). Recasting is used to keep students on topic with minimal interruption, allowing them to hear academically correct models that match and allow students to check their ideas. However, the main focus of recasting in a CLIL setting is often not on correction but on semantic paraphrasing (Mohan & Beckett, 2001 as cited in the study by Lyster, 2007, p. 95).

Furthermore, the outcomes of CLIL are difficult to identify (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2018). Studies that focus on the outcomes of CLIL tend to focus more on language as it can more easily be measured quantitatively than content (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Nikula *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, studies that focus on language acquisition due to CLIL are often confounded by other factors such as pre-existing language knowledge or language acquisition that might be contributed to accompanying language courses (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Further mixed results on language acquisition show that many of the studies are conducted on elective courses that tend to draw students with higher motivation and aptitude in language learning (Bruton, 2011). However, of the 25 articles exploring CLIL language outcomes analyzed by Graham *et al.* (2018), most showed that the CLIL students performed equal to or better than non-CLIL students on tests. As for content learning, as most CLIL classes are filled with content-rich videos and other visuals, CLIL students have an easier chance of comprehending the content (Graham *et al.*, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to report on two English elective courses I designed and taught using the fundamentals of CLIL. I begin with an explanation of the students, courses, lessons, activities, and materials while providing justifications for many of my design choices. Next, I offer some informal observations of the CLIL classes, along with some possible recommendations for those who wish to teach courses that are more aligned with the CLIL approach.

Course and Lesson Design

The following is a description of the students as well as the course and lesson designs. As this is merely a report on the CLIL courses and lessons I designed and taught, the descriptions of the students are based on observations I made while teaching; I do not have any objective evidence about their actual language abilities or comprehensive knowledge of each students' department or major.

Students

The students enrolled in these elective CLIL courses were second-, third-, and fourth-year university students from different departments studying several different majors in a private Japanese university. Their first language was Japanese. The students also differed greatly in English language proficiency, ranging from fairly fluent speakers of English to those who sometimes struggled to form complete sentences depending on the complexity of the topic.

Course Design

I designed two elective courses, both taught in the same semester. The students in each course met for 100 minutes once a week for 14 weeks. The Language and History course had 11 students, and the Japanese Studies Through English course had 25 students. Each elective course was taught entirely in English. I used the same general design for each course's syllabus and the same general

format for each lesson across both courses. Each lesson during weeks 1-7 and 9-13 focused on a different topic related to the theme of the course. Each course also had a midterm and final presentation assignment in weeks 8 and 14, respectively. On the same day as the midterm and final presentations, the students submitted a one-page single-spaced reaction paper that included a one-paragraph summary of the lectures and homework readings for each lesson leading up to the assignment (weeks 1-7 for the midterm and weeks 9-13 for the final), along with an opinion paragraph reacting to some of the topics they had studied throughout the course. Table 1 contains the syllabus for the Japanese Studies Through English course. Table 2 shows the Language and History syllabus.

Table 1

Syllabus for a Japanese Studies Through English Elective Course

Week	Topic	Homework Due
1	Course Introduction; What is Cool Japan and Soft Power? Reading Skills; Writing summaries	
2	Japanese Traditional Culture and Past Influences; Lecture; Discussion; Note Taking Skills	Reading & Summary
3	Japanese Films; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
4	Japanese Martial Arts; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
5	Japanese Food; Lecture; Discussion; Presentation Skills	Reading & Summary
6	Japanese Music; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
7	Japanese Fashion; Lecture; Discussion	Prepare for Assignment 1
8	Assignment 1 – Presentation 1 (small groups)	Presentation 1/Reaction 1
9	Japanese Subcultures; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
10	Japanese Manga; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
11	Japanese Anime; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
12	Japanese Cosplay; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
13	Japanese Video Games; Lecture; Discussion	Prepare for Assignment 2
14	Assignment 2 – Final Presentation (small groups)	Presentation 2/Reaction 2

Table 2

Syllabus for the Language and History Course

Week	Topic	Homework Due
1	Course Introduction; Origins of Language; Reading Skills review; Writing summaries review	
2	Origins of Speech and Writing; Lecture; Discussion; Note Taking Skills review	Reading & Summary
3	Languages of the World; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
4	Language Diversity; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
5	History of English; Lecture; Discussion; Presentation Skills	Reading & Summary
6	Etymology (word origins); Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
7	Place and People Names; Lecture; Discussion	Prepare for Assignment 1
8	Assignment 1 – Mini-Presentation (small groups)	Presentation 1/Reaction 1
9	Language Change; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
10	The Electronic Revolution; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
11	Political Correctness; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
12	Dying Languages; Lecture; Discussion	Reading & Summary
13	Modern Languages; Lecture; Discussion	Prepare for Assignment 2
14	Assignment 2 – Final Presentation (small groups)	Presentation 2/Reaction 2

Lesson Design

Each lesson followed the same general format containing four to five tasks or discussions. I chose this uniformity because I find that when working with mixed-level classes, routines foster confidence in students with low-level proficiency in the target language as they know what is expected of them in each lesson. Activities for the lessons were chosen to maximize the students' exposure to the content as well as all four language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

For each lesson, the students sat in the same group of three to four learners for the duration of the lesson, with new group configurations at the beginning of each lesson. The lessons began with a review of the previous lesson's topic. The discussion was facilitated by questions that focused on reviewing the main messages and supporting ideas of the previous lesson's content. Next, the students engaged in a warm-up discussion or activity to activate the pre-existing vocabulary and knowledge the students have on the topic, a form of scaffolding as mentioned in the study by Mahan (2022). Following the warm-up discussion, I gave a mini-lecture on the weekly topic. As they listened to the lecture with accompanying visuals on slides, the students took notes using the note-taking skills taught during lesson two. Each lecture contained a video on the lesson's topic to give the students an opportunity to practice listening to natural expressions and speaking speeds in authentic materials; this choice was made to help students gain a richer understanding of the content (Graham *et al.*, 2018). Closed captioning subtitles were turned on to help students with low-level proficiency in English process the information. After the lecture, the students compared their notes to fill in gaps in the information they might have missed, along with identifying the main messages and supporting ideas about the topic. I encouraged the students to include these main messages and ideas in their summary writing homework, a weekly assignment the students completed in order to help write their mid-term and final reaction papers. The note-taking discussion also helped students with low-level proficiency in English notice any missed key points, confirm what they had heard, and discuss what they had just learned. The final discussion for each lesson focused on that week's topic, including questions about their opinions as well as questions that allowed the students to discuss the topic critically as recommended by Dalton-Puffer (2006 as cited in the study by Lyster, 2007, p. 92) as comprehension questions tend to limit student responses. Many of the lessons also ended with a short instructive activity on a skill that might be needed for a future activity or assignment (e.g., note taking, summary writing, paragraph writing, presentation script writing, slide design, etc.). Finally, students were given an authentic text on the following week's topic to read and summarize in writing for homework. Figure 1 shows a sample lesson plan from the Japanese Studies Through English course. The structure of the lesson in this plan closely aligns with most of the lessons taught during these two courses. The main difference between each lesson, besides the topic, included variations in the types of tasks completed during the warm-up phase and the special skill often taught at the end of the lesson. These lesson plans were also distributed to the students weekly as worksheets and often included visual images related to the topic of discussion for that week that the students would critically analyze and discuss.

At the end of each discussion activity (tasks 1–4 on the lesson plan), the students shared interesting information, ideas, and opinions from their group's discussion with the rest of the class. To avoid a lack of volunteers as well as give each learner the opportunity to report back to the class, the students played rock paper scissors after each discussion to decide who would share. The student who lost the game had to report to the class. To prevent nervous students from not knowing what to

Figure 1

Sample Lesson Plan from the Japanese Studies Through English Course.

Lesson 10 - JSTE 6/17 (F)

1. **Review Discussion from Last Lecture**
   1. How has Japan influenced other countries with Japanese subcultures?
   2. What ideas and values from Japanese subcultures do you think would be a good message for people overseas to help them understand how Japanese people think?
   3. What are the main messages/ideas from last week's lesson?

2. **Warm-up Discussion about Japanese *Manga***
   a. Look at the *manga* and comics on the table at the front of the room. Make notes. Then, discuss the following with your partners: What are the similarities and differences you can see between the Japanese *manga* and English comics? What are the similarities and differences you can see between the Japanese *manga* and English translations of *manga*?

Japanese *Manga*	English *Manga* Translations	English Comics

3. **The Influence of Japanese *Manga* Lecture**
   a. Please listen to the mini-lecture.
   b. Take notes and write down questions you have.
   c. Compare your notes with those of your partners. Write info you might have missed.
   d. What ideas from today's lecture would you include in a 1-2 sentence summary?

4. **Weekly Topic Discussion** - In small groups, answer the following questions:
   a. What were the most interesting things you learned from today's reading & lecture?
   b. Do you read Japanese manga? Why or why not? If yes, what *manga* do you read?
   c. What Japanese *manga* do you think are popular in Japan? Why?
   d. What Japanese *manga* do you think are popular overseas? Why?
   e. What can people overseas learn about Japan from *manga*?

5. **Paragraph Writing - Structure and Topic Sentences**
   a. Let's look at the "Paragraph Writing" worksheets.

6. **Any questions?**

Homework

Read the Homework Reading and write a short summary for *Fri., June 24 (13:25)*. Write the summary on the Summary Doc that you linked to the Gateway Document.

Note: Students received a copy of the lesson plan for each lesson.

share, I gave a 30-second preparation time to confer with their partners about what they should say. Students who reported back after a discussion were subsequently exempted from the next few rock paper scissors rounds. Thus, most students only had to speak to the entire class once per lesson, unless they raised their hand to volunteer information or ran out of group members who had not shared yet as we completed each discussion or task. These group reports allowed students the chance to speak English and to hear what other groups in the class were talking about. The reports also allowed me to recast their responses using proper grammar and the content-related vocabulary (Lyster, 2007) that was often mentioned during the lecture.

Observations and Recommendations

The following observations and recommendations are based on casual observations I made while teaching the two CLIL elective courses.

Observations

One of the most impressive observations I made during these two CLIL elective courses was the absence of spoken Japanese. Students with varying English language proficiency levels in both courses spoke only English for the full 100-minute lessons across all 14 weeks during group work, discussions, presentations, and when addressing the entire class. Surprisingly, the students chose to speak only English on their own volition as I had never explicitly instructed them to do so. Perhaps, the nature of the course compelled them to communicate only in English. It could also be due to the higher motivation and language learning aptitude of students drawn to English electives as mentioned by Bruton (2011). Another observation was the frequent assistance the students with high-level English proficiency provided those with lower proficiency in English. This action was facilitated and perhaps encouraged by the consistent confirmation checks I had built into each lesson. Lastly, it should be noted that the students consistently provided insightful observations and critiques on the weekly topics rather than a mere regurgitation of the facts they had learned.

Recommendations

Based on my observations while teaching these two CLIL courses, I would like to make a few recommendations. To begin with, CLIL lessons have the possibility of providing a much-needed relief from rigid English lessons that focus mainly on grammar, translation, test strategies, and single language skill building (e.g., listening courses). Additionally, elective English classes based on an underlying core content (e.g., Japanese Studies Through English, Language and History, World Heritage Sites) provide an excellent foundation for applying CLIL practices. Finding a way to implement some core CLIL practices into the aforementioned rigid English lessons might be a productive next step. Should a teacher decide to design and implement a CLIL course or lesson, proper scaffolding should be provided for the mixed level of English proficiency these classes often have. Lesson activities should be designed to allow students a chance to critically analyze and comment on the content in order to get a deeper understanding of the topics of discussion (Dalton-Puffer, 2006 as cited in Lyster, 2007, p. 92). Finally, it might be possible for both content and language teachers to be encouraged to use their expertise to teach CLIL elective courses at the university level.

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