

Shared Inquiry and CLIL: A Teaching Practice Report

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Abstract

The Shared Inquiry method is a form of collaborative learning that requires students to relate the themes in a literary work to their own lives (Browning & Halvorsen, 1996). Some have argued that this method can support foreign language students at Japanese universities to develop the four macro skills and improve critical thinking. In this practice report, I review my experiences teaching Shared Inquiry to Japanese university students. First, I describe my experiences teaching the course using materials published by the Great Books Foundation, which originated the Shared Inquiry method, then using the materials I recently developed for a CLIL seminar focused on Japanese culture at Rikkyo University. At the end, I argue that the Shared Inquiry approach may be useful for designing CLIL classes.

Keywords: Shared Inquiry, CLIL, Content-based Learning

The Shared Inquiry method is a form of collaborative learning that requires students to relate the themes in a literary work to their own lives (Browning & Halvorsen, 1996). The method is based on the “Great Books” seminars conducted at the University of Chicago (Great Books Foundation, 2021, p. 1). The question of whether the literary works chosen are objectively great is irrelevant. The important point is that the works hang together around some common themes. To employ Shared Inquiry, everyone must read the same passage before class and be prepared to discuss that passage using examples from the text itself (Great Books Foundation, 2021). Some have argued that this method can support foreign language students at Japanese universities to develop the four macro skills and to improve critical thinking (e.g., Browning & Halvorsen, 1995; Browning & Halvorsen, 1996).

I have taught using Shared Inquiry in Japan for five years: three years with English majors at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, next, in a twice-per-week lecture and discussion class at Rikkyo University; and now in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) seminar about Japanese culture at Rikkyo University. CLIL courses, which are increasingly part of English language curricula across Japan, usually require language teachers to teach content as a means to improve language skills (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). Shared Inquiry is a useful approach for CLIL teachers because it plays to their strengths. Teaching Shared Inquiry requires the ability to make complex ideas comprehensible, create stimulating discussion questions, and encourage student-centeredness. Conversely, Shared Inquiry does *not* require language teachers to pretend to be experts about things which they are not. In what follows, I provide two examples of the Shared Inquiry method. First, using materials published by the Great Books Foundation (2021), which originated the Shared Inquiry method, and then with the materials I recently developed for my CLIL seminar.

Shared Inquiry Example 1

The following excerpts and discussion questions were adapted from the Shared Inquiry textbook *Introduction to Great Books 3*, produced by the Great Books Foundation (1990). Below is an excerpt

from the first reading in the book—A selection from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*:

The proper function of man, then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it. In speaking of the proper function of a given individual we mean that it is the same in kind as the function of an individual who sets high standards for himself...On these assumptions, if we take the proper function of man to be a certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and consists in actions performed in conjunction with the rational element, and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well and properly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it; we reach the conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete.

In a Shared Inquiry activity, students may be asked to discuss as many as 15 questions related to a single reading. For brevity, the following is a discussion questions specifically related to the above excerpt:

What do you think Aristotle means when he says that “good” for human beings is “an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence or virtue”? Do you think that behaving correctly is necessary for your happiness?

Whereas the above excerpt from Aristotle would be difficult to parse even for native speakers of English, my experience has been that through discussing this question, students can grasp the basic point that Aristotle is describing an understanding of happiness very different from theirs. The typical Japanese college student likely equates happiness with the number of pleasurable states they experience (Tiberius & Hall, 2010). In contrast, Aristotle thinks that happiness is intimately connected to correct behavior, or that happiness depends on adhering to principles that are always correct regardless of how we feel about them. Students can interrogate their own beliefs about this further via questions such as the following:

- Is a good person automatically happy?
- Can happiness mean different things to different people?
- Can a person have his or her own idea about how to be happy?

Next, students read Mary Lavin’s short story *On Happiness*. After reading Aristotle, the following excerpt provides an interesting contrast:

There was only one place Mother found rest. When she was at breaking point and fit to fall, she’d go out into the garden—not to sit or stroll around but to dig, to drag up weeds, to move great clumps of corms or rhizomes, or indeed quite frequently to haul huge rocks from one place to another. She was always laying down a path, building a dry wall, or making compost heaps as high as hills. However jaded she might be going out, when dark forced her in at last her step had the spring of a daisy. So if she did not succeed in defining happiness to our understanding, we could see that whatever it was, she possessed it to the full when she was in her garden.

One of us said as much one Sunday when Bea and I dropped round for the afternoon. Father Hugh was with us again. “It’s an unthinking happiness, though,” he caviled.

Once again, the students may be given many discussion questions about this short story; however, the following question is directly related to the above excerpt:

Why does Mother have happiness “to the full” when she is working in her garden? Why does Father Hugh call her happiness “unthinking”?

The view of happiness depicted here is likely closer to the students’ own view: That engaging in something pleasurable without any obligation to conform to some standard of behavior *is* true happiness (e.g., Frey & Vogler, 2019). Through discussion, students may recognize Aristotle’s perspective smuggled into the story via the character of Father Hugh, who represents the position that happiness and virtue are intertwined. Students can deepen their discussion further via questions such as the following:

- By talking so much about happiness, is Mother trying to teach her daughters how to be happy, or is she trying to convince herself that she is happy?
- Must a person experience sadness to know true happiness?
- Why does Mother think that happiness has no value if it can be easily erased?

Later in the course, students will have the opportunity to think more about happiness; for example, through discussing excerpts from John Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct* students will be introduced to the view that happiness is not a choice but a habit, that is, that the difference between happiness and unhappiness is related to how one directs their attention. In contrast, through discussing a selection from Plato’s *The Crito*—which chronicles the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates’ refusal to flee Athens and escape execution—the students will be introduced to the idea that happiness is irrelevant. Rather, acting in accordance with a principle is the highest form of human life.

A few points about Shared Inquiry can be gleaned from these examples. First, helping students discuss complex, academic-level literary works *to develop their language skills* does not require specialist-level knowledge about the historical context or original language. Second, encouraging students to relate a literary work to their own lives can empower them to say more about it. L2 learners enrolled in a CLIL class can likely already express a lot about their lives; Shared Inquiry encourages learners to bring those skills into the discussion of academic-level texts and themes.

Shared Inquiry Example 2

As noted above, the number of CLIL courses is increasing at many Japanese universities (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). During the 2022 academic year, I was allowed to pilot a new CLIL course devoted to Japanese culture at Rikkyo University. As a longtime resident of Japan, I have an amateur interest in Japanese culture; however, I am not an expert in Japanese studies. For this reason, I chose to develop the CLIL course using Shared Inquiry. My goal was to find representative texts that would be familiar to students because they were assigned these texts in their junior high school or high school classes. Table 1 below lists the texts I chose.

Table 1
CLIL Texts

“Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer” by Murakami Haruki
“The Seventeen-Article Constitution” by Prince Shotoku
“Esoteric and Exoteric Teachings” by Kukai
“The Tale of Genji” (excerpts) by Murasaki Shikibu
“Good and Evil” by Shinran
“Meaning and Context” by Dogen
“In Defense of the Japanese Way” by Motoori Norinaga
“Conditions for Reform” by Yosano Akiko
“Pure Experience” by Nishida Kitaro
“The Rise of Women’s Movements” by Hiratsuka Raicho
“The Classics Reborn” by Nakano Koji

Unlike in Example 1 above, I created all the course materials myself using a two-stage process: First, I found conceptually rich excerpts from English translations of the texts I chose and, in many cases, simplified the language for readability; second, I created discussion questions that either focused on specific content in these excerpts or larger themes in the work. I relied on Heisig, et al.’s (2011) *Japanese Philosophy: A Source Book* for most of the translations; I also relied on Kasulis’ (2018) commentary for some of my discussion questions. Below is an excerpt from my modified version of the Kukai reading from Table 1 above:

Question: According to what you have said, teachings about the essence of Buddhism that are beyond language and thinking are called esoteric, and anything else is exoteric. Is this correct?

Response: There are many definitions of exoteric and esoteric. Viewed from the perspective of shallow teachings, deeper ones are esoteric and the shallow ones are exoteric.

...Exoteric teachings give medicine according to the capacity of the listener; its words are not useless...[However] what I mean by esoteric is the ultimate, highest teaching. ...Compared to the esoteric teachings, the exoteric teachings are not true and real...This difference should be clearly understood.

Even on a casual reading, Kukai is clearly describing two types of knowledge: the exoteric and the esoteric teachings. The following discussion questions adapted from Kasulis (2018) can help students understand the distinction he is making:

- Who knows more about clay? (A) a geologist or (B) a potter?
- Who knows more about language? (A) a linguist or (B) a poet?
- Who knows more about light? (A) a physicist or (B) a photographer?
- Who knows more about breath? (A) a pulmonologist or (B) a meditator?

Through discussing these questions, students can recognize that all the category A professions (geologist, linguist, etc.) make use of exoteric knowledge, that is, knowledge that is public and verifiable. In contrast, all the category B professions (potter, poet, etc.) make use of esoteric knowledge, that is, knowledge based on direct experience that is incomprehensible to those without similar experience. As the excerpt above indicates, Kukai views esoteric knowledge as superior to exoteric knowledge. Students can discuss the implicates of Kukai’s argument further via questions such as the following:

On the last page, Kukai writes “...Exoteric teachings give medicine according to the capacity of the listener; its words are not useless...[However] what I mean by esoteric is the ultimate, highest teaching. ...Compared to the esoteric teachings, the exoteric teachings are not true and real...This difference should be clearly understood.” Are there really esoteric teachings? Or does Kukai just want power?

Next, students read an excerpt from Washburn’s (2015) translation of Murasaki Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji*. Whereas the entire translation is over 1000 pages, the following excerpt appears in Chapter 55, which in Washburn’s translation is entitled “Fireflies.” Here, Genji is speaking to his favorite consort Murasaki about a book she is reading:

Genji studied the illustration. “How precocious children were back then. I was quite reserved by comparison when I was their age ... a model of behavior, really.” In truth, he was fond of being the model for all sorts of unheard-of behavior.

“You shouldn’t be reading love stories in front of [my daughter],” he continued. “She may not be all that intrigued by some young girl holding a secret love in her heart, but she is destined to be Empress, and it would be most unfortunate if she grew to accept the idea that it was normal for such affairs to actually take place.”

...“People with shallow minds may imitate the behavior they read about in these stories, but they look rather pathetic when they do,” Murasaki replied. “In *The Tale of the Hollow Tree*, the young Fujiwara Princess, Atemiya, is a prudent, dignified woman who never goes astray. However, her manner is stiff and unyielding, she lacks feminine grace, and her story ends up being just as bad an influence.”

Earlier in the story, Genji chastised another of his consorts—Tamakazura—for reading superficial stories. In that part, Genji preached a view very similar to Kukai’s: That reading such stories is only valuable insofar as they impart something about the true nature of reality. As the above excerpt shows, when Genji shared his analysis with Murasaki, she indirectly criticizes him for being shallow. Through discussing this passage, students can come to understand that Murasaki is critiquing a philosophical anthropology, that is, a theory about what it is to be human, prevalent during her time. Genji’s philosophical anthropology, based on the idea that there is no stable self, denies human agency. Throughout the novel, Murasaki Shikibu criticizes the superficial belief systems of her aristocratic—and especially her male—characters in this way.

Later in the course, students will have the opportunity to interrogate this critique in more detail while discussing works by Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raicho, arguably the founders of Japanese feminism. As a brief introduction, in her essay “The Conditions for Reform,” Yosano Akiko argues that Japanese women must claim the agency that Genji—at least in the above excerpt—appears to deny them. In contrast, Hiratsuka Raicho asserts—in her essay “The Rise of Women’s Movements” as well as other places—that the entire male-created system needs to be dismantled and rebuilt into something else. Through reading both articles, learners can come to recognize that Japan has a feminist tradition, and that this tradition is in continuity with the emphasis on naturalness found throughout Japan’s intellectual history (Brown, 1993). Particularly in Hiratsuka Raicho’s writing, it is obvious that her view of feminism is deeply connected with basic, biological facts about being a woman—including the desire to have children.

Final Thoughts

As noted above, Shared Inquiry allows language teachers to develop content-based courses that play to their strengths, that is, Shared Inquiry encourages teachers to read deeply and create discussion questions that encourage student-centeredness; however, Shared Inquiry does not require a teacher be an expert about all the literary works he or she will assign. Instead, this method encourages teachers to select works that are conceptually rich and hang together around similar themes. In the first example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Mary Lavin's *On Happiness* share the common theme of happiness in human life. In the second example, Kukai's philosophy of exoteric and esoteric knowledge supplies two conflicting views about the nature of truth. Genji adopts the esoteric view that the only true knowledge is that which illuminates the Buddhist path; however, his interlocutors point out that this view is shallow and inaccurate. Indeed, conflicting views of how and on what basis we can know things flow through the Japanese intellectual tradition, including into early expressions of Japanese feminism. In this way, Shared Inquiry can be an effective way to develop a CLIL course because, whereas the emphasis is still on the content, the way students engage with the content is primarily through invoking personal experiences and using their language to talk about it. When level-appropriate, my experience has been that this is an extremely rewarding—and even addictive—way to teach CLIL.

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