

Reflections on the “Study Abroad Preparation: IELTS” Level 1 & 2 Pilot Courses

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors describe their experiences of piloting two Study Abroad Preparation (SAP) IELTS courses at a university in Tokyo. These courses are part of a curriculum reform and shift towards implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at the institution. The authors detail the lesson contents of each course and reflect on their experiences of meeting the dual aims of study abroad content and IELTS focus. The key differences were that the level 1 basic course was taught using a course book, mostly as self-study, and followed a strict lesson sequence and reflective cycle, whereas the level 2 intermediate course used materials from the internet and had a freer, more adaptable structure. The authors describe the changes that they made to the courses in the fall semester based on their experiences in the spring. In the conclusion, the possibility of swapping these approaches is considered, along with general considerations for the courses and suggestions for further development.

Keywords: *CLIL, Study abroad, IELTS*

Introduction

From 2024, Rikkyo University will offer elective Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses in the following areas: Global Communication, Global Studies and Global Career. The Study Abroad Preparation (SAP) IELTS courses are part of the Global Communication section. The courses are designed for students who want to study abroad in the future and need to improve their English skills. The course content has a dual focus of study abroad topics and IELTS test preparation.

The authors of this paper piloted the SAP: IELTS 1 (Basic) and SAP: IELTS 2 (Intermediate) courses in preparation for the launch of the new curriculum. The basic level was taught with a course book used mostly for self-study, and highly-structured class time; the intermediate level had no course book, and a more varied and adaptable use of class time. This paper will report on the initial Spring 2023 semester classes and adaptations made for the Fall

semester.

Literature Review

The implementation of CLIL as a pedagogical framework for courses at educational institutions in Japan has become more widespread in recent years. CLIL is described by Coyle et al. (2010) as “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (p. 1). The degree to which the latter is focused upon is variable. CLIL can be defined as *soft*, meaning substantial language support is given to the learner, or *hard*, meaning there is little or no language support given (MacGregor, 2015). As the SAP: IELTS 1 (Basic) and SAP: IELTS 2 (Intermediate) courses by nature of their description involved language instruction, from the onset the instructors of these classes envisaged a soft CLIL approach. In addition, these courses from the Global Communication section of the curriculum are intended to assist students to transition between mandatory, first-year English language classes and the more content-focused Global Studies courses (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021).

Although the degree of language support within a CLIL lesson is left to the discretion of the instructor, what are commonly referred to as the 4C’s are an essential component of the framework (Coyle et al., 2010). Content refers to the subject matter of the course, which was study abroad content in the case of these two courses. Communication is the use of language as “a conduit for communication and for learning” (Coyle, 2005, p. 5). A key feature of CLIL lessons is the focus on developing independent thinking and learning skills and this forms the Cognition component (Coyle, 2005). Finally, Culture is the fostering of intercultural competencies and a sense of global citizenship (Coyle et al., 2010). The degree to which these components could be integrated into teaching a course which also had an exam focus was a matter of uncertainty for the instructors prior to the planning and delivery of the classes.

The reform of the curriculum at Rikkyo University was necessitated in part by plans to both provide domestic students with increased opportunities to attend study abroad programs and to accept more international students from overseas (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and recent economic factors have impacted upon these proposals. Nevertheless, in 2022, 1061 students attended in-person study abroad programs provided by Rikkyo University (M. Shrosbree, personal communication, October 14, 2023).

The benefits of study abroad programs, both short-term and of longer duration, have been well documented. Positive effects include not only improving English language skills (Suzuki & Hayashi, 2014) but also enhancing cross-cultural sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2006) and intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005). However, pre-departure preparation is crucial for students to optimize their study abroad experiences and reduce anxiety (Kato & Landsberry, 2020). Causes of anxiety are many; for example, contrasting educational approaches between different countries (Neff et al., 2018) and concerns about language

proficiency and communication skills (Kato & Landsberry, 2020). Therefore, there appears to be a strong foundation for the establishment of these kinds of courses.

Study Skills and Course Materials

These courses meet once a week for 100 minutes, over a 14-week semester. It is important for students to understand that the lessons alone are unlikely to be sufficient to make them fluent and confident in study abroad situations nor to raise their language proficiency to achieve a test score they are seeking for study abroad applications. An element of the courses is therefore to help students develop skills and find resources for continuing their learning independently. This is done through keeping a record of study and reflecting on learning. This may also be considered to meet CLIL criteria for the course design. Reflection on learning requires meta-level consideration and thus develops cognitive skills; and it is important preparation for studying abroad in places where students are often expected to study independently.

This element of the course also raises the question of whether to use a course book or resources available on the internet. The advantages of the former are that official books will have correct and up-to-date information about the tests, materials are adapted to be appropriate to the level of the students (assuming they enter the level matching their proficiency), materials are connected to IELTS practice tasks and tips for the test, and there will be additional support in the form of teacher’s books and supplementary materials. The disadvantages include the additional expense, the need to carry a physical book, and that the books considered for these courses appear to be designed for twice-a-week, year-long courses (thus 4 times the material that could be realistically covered in class). On the other hand, the advantages of using online resources are that they can be accessed freely, resources can be matched directly to study abroad topics and can be more up-to-date and relevant to the particular group of students, and students are provided with a set of resources that they can continue to use for self-study after the course. Correspondingly, the disadvantages are that the material is not adapted and may be inaccessible to lower proficiency levels, non-official sites may contain incorrect information about tests, and it is considerably more time consuming for the teacher who has to find and evaluate materials for each lesson.

SAP: IELTS 2 Report

The Students

There were 30 students enrolled on the SAP: IELTS 2 program, and all but one completed the course. The students were mainly sophomores, juniors and seniors with a few freshmen from the Global Liberal Arts Program. The minimum level of ability officially required for this course is CEFR B1/IELTS 5.5 and the target IELTS score is 6–6.5. In reality,

many of the students had a higher level of English language proficiency. Based on information provided by students at the onset of the course, the majority of them intended to study abroad in the future and needed to perform well on the IELTS exam in order to do so. Most of them stated that they chose the course for this reason, although for some it was due to schedule convenience or a more general desire to improve their English. Around half of the students had no prior experience of the IELTS test and the majority stated their target score as the same as that of the course. Around a third of the class had prior experience of studying abroad. Overall, it appeared that the needs and expectations of the students correlated with the course content and objectives.

Course/Lesson Design

The majority of the lessons featured both content of a study abroad nature and an IELTS test focus, with time divided roughly evenly between the two parts. Topics covered on this course were friendship, accommodation, education, managing money, dealing with stress, staying safe and healthy, adapting to different cultures, and immersing yourself in a new lifestyle. I elected to teach this class without a textbook and chose material from free, online sources.

The classes would begin with warm-up questions on the day's topic. These questions were designed with the IELTS speaking test part one in mind, which consists of relatively simple questions. If necessary, more challenging vocabulary was pre-taught, followed by video or reading material related to an aspect of the day's theme. Comprehension questions were set, and students compared their answers in pairs. Finally, students were given discussion prompts based on the content and were encouraged to create their own questions in addition to the prompts. It was intended that this part of the lesson was similar to the IELTS speaking test part three, in which the examiner engages the candidate in a discussion based on the previous section's topic.

Due to the time constraints, only speaking and writing elements of the IELTS test were covered on this course. In lessons designated as IELTS speaking skills days, the second half of the classes were dedicated to IELTS skills input practicing IELTS speaking part two tasks (the candidate's long turn on a topic) and part three discussions. Wherever possible, the skills focus was based upon language from the video or text of that day. Tasks such as gap-fill or categorizing phrases were used to encourage the students to notice the target language of that day. The instructor provided IELTS-style question worksheets, based on the day's topic and the students worked in groups of three, alternating between playing the roles of examiners and candidate. The teacher provided frequent feedback, based upon notes taken whilst monitoring the groups and encouraged learners to utilize the target language/skills of the lesson. In IELTS writing skills lessons, the second part of the class began with a more teacher-centered input on a particular task focus, for example, how to write an overview for task one or how to address all parts of the question in part two. Students were then given examples and practice exercises from online sources. Finally, a 'mock' question was given as homework.

Lessons 5, 9 and 13 were IELTS speaking test days. The content of the tests were topics previously covered in the three lessons prior to each test day. The students formed a group of three, in the same fashion as when practicing speaking tasks in their regular lessons. The instructor evaluated each class member. This method of testing provided the students with the opportunity to practice the three parts of the IELTS speaking test despite the large class size. Although the IELTS exam only has one examiner, a group of three students with two examiners and one candidate allowed for simpler classroom management. While 3 students performed the test, the remaining students completed reflection tasks on their self-study logs and later, their performance in the test.

Observations: Positive

Overall, the students appeared motivated and interested in the study abroad content, which was often based on online material relevant to their lives. For example, one video featured students in the U.K. discussing the best ways to manage their finances at university, and in another an American college student gave advice about how to make friends while studying abroad. From the perspective of implementing the CLIL 4C’s framework described by Coyle et al. (2010), the study abroad lessons provided ample opportunities for three out of the 4C’s. The content was meaningful and relevant to the students’ lives, with plenty of communication and chances to learn and reflect about various cultures (Coyle et al., 2010). In the above instance about making friends, for example, students were given the opportunity to focus upon the content of how to foster friendship while studying abroad, develop communication skills through discussing the content and reflect about cultural similarities and differences towards friendships in different countries.

The class members were also keen to participate in the IELTS input stages of the lesson, as almost all of them had a need to perform well in the test. They cooperated well during the course, especially on speaking test days when classroom management was difficult due to the large class size.

The self-study logs also appeared to be an effective tool on this course. Based on previous experience of teaching elective courses, one problem can be the mixed-level of ability within the classes. Using self-study logs allowed students to individually tailor their self-study to match their levels of ability and the areas of proficiency that they needed to improve. In addition, as a small percentage of the overall evaluation was assigned to the logs, it enforced the message that substantial work outside class is necessary to improve IELTS test scores.

Observations: Negative

Before the pilot courses began, both instructors were concerned about the practicalities of balancing the dual objectives of CLIL-style study abroad content whilst also improving the students’ performance in the IELTS test. In this Intermediate course, with no-textbook, it was difficult at times to find material that was both a suitable topic and provided suitable language

useful for developing IELTS exam skills. In particular, IELTS writing task one requires specific skills, such as describing data or maps, which did not easily align with study abroad material available online. Time constraints imposed by the nature of the IELTS focus on the course meant that it was difficult to implement all of the 4C's which form the components of a CLIL lesson. For example, there was little time to dedicate to tasks to encourage more advanced cognitive skills such as analyzing or evaluating ideas or creating their own work. Finally, while the online content related to study abroad content did appear to motivate the students, there is always the risk of the planned lesson being rendered obsolete if such free, online material becomes unavailable.

The large class size also presented a substantial challenge for this course, especially on speaking test days. Initially, the intention was that the students would complete all three parts of the IELTS speaking test on test days in their groups of mock examiners/candidates. It quickly became apparent that this was unfeasible. In order for each student to be tested in the candidate role within one class, it was necessary for five groups of students to be simultaneously performing the test. This resulted in a huge burden on the instructor, who had to monitor five candidates, assess them and write down feedback points, then repeat the cycle continuously for 100 minutes. The large class size also impacted upon the amount of individual time that could be given to each student.

Changes for the Fall Semester 2023 SAP: IELTS 2

The most important change to be made is regarding evaluation. In the fall semester only two speaking tests will be scheduled. The first test will focus upon IELTS part one and two and the second on parts two and three. Instead of a final speaking test at the end of the course, the final assessment will be a problem/solution cognitive research project about a study abroad topic or a specific problem related to studying IELTS. The intent of changing this part of the course is to provide a greater balance between the dual nature of CLIL-style study abroad topics and the IELTS focus. In particular, it is hoped that the research project will provide a greater focus upon developing cognitive skills through the creation of a personal project, thus better implementing the 4C's CLIL principle.

The second alteration is to provide instruction related to IELTS Writing Part 1 tasks. As it is difficult to find material of a study abroad nature that is also suitable for teaching the necessary skills for this section of the IELTS test, material unconnected to study abroad but appropriate for instruction and practice of IELTS Writing Part 1 will be used.

Finally, I intend to change a few of the topics covered on the course as I found more suitable material during the course of the spring semester.

SAP: IELTS 1 Report

The Students

In the Basic course, taught at Niiza campus, there were 19 students from 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years, and all completed the course. They mostly met the recommended profile and had a level of around CEFR B1. There were a few whose level was higher, or who needed to take an examination soon, who may have been better taking the SAP: IELTS level 2 or 3. Most did not have experience of studying abroad and did not have immediate concrete plans to do so. However, there were some exceptions who had lived abroad, and who had plans to study abroad in the summer vacation following the course. As is quite common with these courses, there were also a small number who had no special intention to take the IELTS test or study abroad but wanted a communication-based English course and this one fit their schedule. The mixture of levels and intentions did not cause any problems in the running of the course.

Course/Lesson Design

Design decisions for the Basic level course were based around the key points of the course description—study abroad content and IELTS style tasks—plus consideration of the CLIL focus of the new curriculum, and the particular needs of lower level students. It is characterized by a strict lesson sequence, reflective cycle, self-study and a focus on productive skills in class time. The course book *Mindset for IELTS 1* (Crosthwaite et al., 2017) was chosen as it seemed accessible to students and had extra online resources.

One of the concerns with the basic level was that exam courses can end up with a lot of metalanguage that is above the communicative level of the students. Furthermore, since the course profile was for students who would study abroad sometime in the future, giving details about test taking strategies was less appropriate than in higher levels. I therefore decided to adopt a highly structured approach in which students would engage in activities matched to the tasks in the IELTS test, but with a reduced amount of training or explanation.

The standard lesson plan was created to reflect the sequence students experience in their first-year mandatory English Discussion Course, with the addition of writing tasks. Topics were chosen by designating one unit of the course book for each input lesson. Early in the course it became clear that there were too many steps, and it was revised as shown below.

Basic Level Standard Lesson Plan

Initial lesson steps:

1. Warmer, ex. Question Circle.
2. Fluency. Simple discussion questions based on homework listening/reading.
3. Speaking skill input.
4. Interview. Groups of three—two students interview the third about the day’s topic.

Rotate to give each student a chance to answer.

5. Long turn. One minute preparation time with topics. Each student gives a long turn, followed by a question from each partner.
6. Discussion. 10 minute discussion of the day's topic.
7. Free writing.
8. Writing skills input.
9. Focused writing.
10. Review/Reflection.
11. Set reading/listening homework.

Revised lesson steps:

1. Fluency. Simple discussion questions based on the homework listening/reading.
2. Speaking skill input/reminders
3. Interview. Groups of three—two students interview the third about the day's topic.
Rotate to give each student a chance to answer.
4. Long turn. Short preparation time with topics. Each student gives a long turn.
5. Discussion. 10 minute discussion of the day's topic.
6. Writing skills input/reminders
7. Focused writing.
8. Reflection and plan for self-study.

Topics for the test lessons in 5, 9 and 13 were originally to be decided by the students, but in the end the second and third were selected by the teacher to increase the study abroad content of the course. The speaking sections were matched to the IELTS speaking test—each lesson begins with a fluency-focused question, then students interview each other in small groups, take turns to respond to a long turn prompt, and finally a discussion. The writing section focused on the IELTS task 1 for the first 6 weeks, and the essay for the remainder of the course.

At the end of each lesson, students completed a reflection and planning task. First they wrote answers to a short set of reflection questions focused on whether they felt they had prepared sufficiently for the class. They then selected the required course book tasks that they would complete for homework (at least 2 texts, either reading or listening). They also listed the additional course book tasks they planned to complete, and any personal study they would complete related to the course. Students were given the choice of doing the reflection and planning on paper and uploading a photo to Google Classroom or using Google Docs. There was around a 50–50 split between paper and digital at the start of the course, with some students switching to digital part way through.

Assessment for the course followed the standard format of electives in the department with 30% given for participation, 40% for tasks and assignments (the Reflection and Planning tasks, specific homework tasks, Study Abroad Plan), and 30% for the “Final Test”. The final test

score was calculated from the 3 test days. These were run in essentially the same way as every other lesson. Speaking and writing input steps were reviews of previous input. The writing step was done under exam conditions, whereas in other classes students were encouraged to help each other and ask questions. Students were also required to submit what they had completed in the allotted time, while in other classes they could complete their work at home to make feedback more useful. Assessment was basically for participation. There were too many students to judge speaking tasks individually. Feedback was given on the writing task, and students were given a predicted band score, but this was not used for the course grade. The reason is that the proficiency level on entering the course varied widely, and there is general consensus among those teaching the courses that the course score should not be an anticipated IELTS score. In cases where a student missed a test day with an officially accepted reason they were offered make-up assignments.

Observations: Positive

The course format allowed for a high level of student talking time and minimal use of Japanese since the tasks were at an appropriate level, the objectives were clear, and the repetition meant that students knew what they were supposed to do. The lessons were dynamic with little chance for students to be distracted. The sequence of gradually starting with casual speaking tasks, building to more academic or abstract discussion and then focusing on writing seemed to work well. It is hoped that the practice of reflection and planning provided skills that students will continue to use. Generally, the students seemed to enjoy the classes, there was a low rate of absences, and feedback was largely positive.

Observations: Negative

Following a strict lesson structure does have some disadvantages. The teacher's role during the class time is mainly that of a manager and time-keeper. During the speaking tasks, I would monitor and take notes on language use, but there was a relatively low level of teacher-student interaction. I felt that compared to other communication-based courses, I did not get to know the students as well. Similarly, during the writing tasks, while students would ask questions, most were focused on practicing writing within a time limit and there was not space for the casual interactions that can help teachers understand their students' needs and adapt classes accordingly.

The way that the course book was used also had some negative aspects. It is a relatively expensive book and students commonly complain if made to buy a book which is then not used sufficiently. In this case, they had the choice to use it as much as they wished as preparation for the classes, but it was rarely used directly in class. However, since I was asking them to select their preparation tasks at the end of the lesson, they had to carry it with them. Those students who only completed the required two course book texts ended up using only a small percentage of the book. Furthermore, the fact that students were selecting how much to study probably

meant on average that they were studying less than if the teacher were selecting and assigning tasks.

The records of reflection and planning that the students completed caused some problems for both teacher and students. Giving the choice of paper or digital created some of the problems. It took a long time to check through the different files. In some lessons, there was not enough time in class to complete the records, leading to additional homework time. As this was a pilot course, the content of the reflection and planning forms had not been trialed and needed some development during the course.

Changes for the Fall Semester 2023 SAP: IELTS 1

Reflection and planning are important parts of the course design, so the difficulties with the record format required development. In the fall semester, a new system will be used in which students have individual Google Forms and a link to a spreadsheet generated from the form. The two elements are attached to individual Google Classroom assignments for each student. Each week, the students write their reflections and plans using the form, and they can easily review their progress by viewing the spreadsheet. The teacher can also review progress easily.

The writing feedback in spring was based on the IELTS rubrics. Upon reflection, this was not the most useful format for this level. There is a lot of metalanguage in the rubrics, and students with lower proficiency will benefit more from general advice on improving their use of language. Most of the writing tasks will be done using Google Docs to allow more efficient feedback using Suggestion/Comments.

Overall, the input will be more organized. In the first pilot, input was chosen in response to emergent student needs. It is more efficient to use elements that are in the course book, and needs are mostly predictable. All test day topics will be related to study abroad; provisionally, travel and vacations, culture, and education. The Study Abroad Plan was almost entirely done in the final lesson in spring; in fall, it will be spread across the course.

Conclusion

In this paper, two contrasting approaches were taken to piloting the Study Abroad courses. At the intermediate level, there was no course book, and the classes followed a general structure but were adapted to the needs of the students and the interests of the instructor. In contrast, for the basic level a course book was used, but mostly for self-study, and class time was highly-structured. Overall, the students in both courses appeared to be satisfied with the classes and motivated by the study abroad content which was to a great extent quite relevant to their lives. From the perspective of an instructor, issues such as record-keeping and managing the procedure on test days can be improved relatively easily through adjustments made in the next semester. As balancing the dual course content study abroad topics and IELTS within

a CLIL framework presents a challenge for instructors, a ‘soft’ CLIL approach seems to be the solution. From the experience of teaching these courses, it appears that a no-textbook option is the better option in terms of the burden of cost on the student and flexibility with material content. A list of suggested websites and other resources will be available. However, instructors with less experience of the IELTS test could find the prospect of teaching these courses somewhat intimidating without a textbook. Furthermore, especially for the basic level, the structured format with an emphasis of maximizing time spent on productive skills in class, may be more appropriate. Finally, smaller class sizes would undoubtedly assist with course management and individual time given to each student.

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