

# A CLIL Approach to IELTS Test Preparation

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## Abstract

For the new Study Abroad Preparation (SAP) IELTS 2 course at Rikkyo University, teachers were instructed to take a Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to prepare students for both the IELTS test and study abroad. It was investigated whether CLIL was an appropriate approach for IELTS preparation and how the dual roles of the class could be complementarily balanced in a curriculum. It was decided a CLIL approach to teaching could be beneficial for IELTS test takers, but that class time should be divided between a CLIL approach to study-abroad preparation and explicit focus on the test via a coursebook. Research was done to investigate student perspectives on decisions made during course design with the results largely justifying decisions taken. It was concluded that CLIL teaching can benefit exam preparation courses and be included in curricula but that features of traditional exam preparation should not be abandoned if the teacher wishes to address student needs. There is a real-life need for exam familiarization, advice and practice that cannot be provided with a purely CLIL approach.

**Keywords:** *CLIL, IELTS, Study Abroad*

## Introduction

Study Abroad Preparation (SAP) IELTS 2 (Intermediate) is an elective English language course which is one of the global communication courses provided by Rikkyo University since spring 2024. It consists of fourteen 100-minute classes. It is for students who wish to study abroad and is intended to both help students prepare for overseas study and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. The IELTS test is a four skill English language test, a test score between 5.5 to 7 or more out of 9 is often required to enter university in many countries (Breeze, 2014). The IELTS test is therefore a necessity for many students who wish to study abroad. All the courses in the global communication courses are designated as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses, and teachers should take a CLIL approach to teaching the courses. CLIL has previously been defined by the author as a “teaching or learning process in which content provision and language learning are intertwined” (Thomas, 2021). Although a CLIL course must always contain content teaching and language support, there is no one way to teach CLIL. It is an approach in which the curriculum designer or teacher can

choose the best balance between content and language focus.

CLIL with its focus on content and language aid to support understanding of that content could be seen as a suitable approach to prepare students for study abroad. Foltyn (2019) suggests that CLIL “introduce[s] a wider cultural context [and] prepare[s] the learner for international activities and exchanges” (p. 2). However, the approach could be less suitable for IELTS exam preparation courses which are usually focused on familiarizing students with the test and teaching strategies that could help improve learners test scores (Smirnova, 2017).

The author was given the SAP IELTS 2 course to teach during semester 1 of the 2024–2025 academic year which was the first year the course was offered after the piloting stage. The course design required careful consideration as the IELTS test and study abroad components needed to be balanced in curriculum design, as the piloting teachers noted, stating “balancing the dual course content study abroad topics and IELTS within a CLIL framework presents a challenge for instructors” (Mabe & Selman, 2024).

IELTS is a high-stakes exam and the score students obtain can have a significant impact on their lives. The author therefore felt it necessary to review literature in order to investigate what CLIL is and why this approach has been deemed suitable for IELTS exam preparation. Whether a CLIL approach to exam preparation is possible and favourable. And could CLIL teaching on study-abroad content have a positive effect on students IELTS scores. This paper will then feature an explanation of how the course was designed. Finally, research into student perspectives on the approach taken to course design will be outlined.

## Literature Review

### CLIL

CLIL came to prominence as an approach to language teaching in schools in Europe during the mid-90s. It involved teachers teaching school subjects such as science and geography in a second language. Language and content were taught simultaneously with learners expected to learn language in context. This was a decisive move away from previous language teaching curricula built on sequenced grammar or lexis in which content was constructed to highlight grammatical or lexical patterns. Authenticity of content was prioritized over whether it featured certain language items that should be learned (Thomas, 2023). A CLIL approach has the benefit of allowing content and language to be taught simultaneously. It allows learners to learn in a more real-life way by being exposed to authentic uses of language, helping them to negotiate with language meaning outside the classroom.

Coyle et al. (2010) have attempted to formulate the theoretical underpinnings of CLIL. They promote the Language Triptych and The 4Cs frameworks as guides for teachers creating CLIL curricula. The author has discussed these in detail in previous research (Thomas, 2023). Briefly the Triptych is visualized as a triangle with 3 points, *Language of learning*, *Language for learning*, and *Language through learning*, CLIL linguistic progression forms the middle of the

triangle (Martín del Pozo, 2016). *Language of learning* is the language needed to comprehend content. *Language for learning* is the language needed while learning such as to communicate ideas. *Language through learning* is the language learnt in lessons. The CLIL curricula designer should consult the Triptych when deciding what language support taught content demands. The 4Cs refer to *content*, *cognition*, *communication*, and *culture*. *Content* addresses the need for content to be learned and sought individually by learners. *Cognition* refers to learners being able to utilize learnt content outside a classroom setting. *Culture* refers to students understanding the cultural context in which content is based. *Communication* refers to the necessity for learners to be able to communicate what they have learned. All four elements should feature in CLIL lessons.

The Japanese government, universities and educators have been increasingly promoting the adoption CLIL methodology (Lockley, 2015). Rikkyo University is one of these universities and has taken a CLIL approach to design of its global communication courses, of which SAP IELTS 2 is one. The global communication courses are designed to help students progress from Rikkyo's first year English language courses and the English Medium Courses (EMI) available to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). The courses are envisioned to take a 'soft' CLIL approach (Mabe & Selman, 2024). A soft-CLIL approach means that learners are given significant support in content comprehension. This is opposed to a hard-CLIL approach in which learners are given minimal support and expected to negotiate meaning individually. The soft-CLIL approach aligns Rikkyo with the majority of Japanese institutions who have tended to take such an approach (Thomas, 2023).

## **IELTS and CLIL**

Gaining a specified score on the IELTS exam is necessary for many students who wish to study abroad. It has been argued that many IELTS preparation courses focus on the test, rather than general language teaching. The test format is presented and students are exposed to the different tasks featured in the test, such as describing visual data in writing task one. Students are in addition taught strategies for tackling tasks and asked to repeatedly practice the test (Minakova, 2020). It has been argued that a 'a learning-oriented approach to test taking' be adopted so that classes have relevance outside the classroom and not just for the test (Minakova, 2020).

Using a CLIL approach to the study abroad element of the SAP IELTS 2 course could clearly be suitable. As the course is intended to bridge 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> year courses at Rikkyo University, it could also be used to bridge the experience of study in Japan and overseas. By exposing students to content and having them investigate their own content in its authentic cultural setting, they would gain knowledge they could use outside the classroom. It also seems arguable that exposure to authentic study abroad related content could have a positive effect on IELTS test takers score if the content were related to common topics featured in the test. Students could be exposed to the contextual background of exam content and be familiarized

with notions, lexis, and grammatical content related to the test themes.

Research has suggested that CLIL lessons based around IELTS themes can improve students test scores. Bayram et al. (2019) in a comparative study found students who had CLIL elements incorporated in their preparation received higher IELTS scores. Satayev et al. (2022) reported results from research in which CLIL instruction improved students' performance in all elements of the IELTS test, particularly speaking. Baddane and Ennam (2023) in their research argued that the increased contextualisation in CLIL lessons improves students IELTS reading scores, increased performance in the reading part of the test was also noted by Foltyn (2019).

It seems reasonable to suggest CLIL is a suitable approach for the SAP IELTS 2 course. CLIL is especially relevant to the study abroad preparation element of the course. Moreover, if the study abroad element of the course is related to IELTS themes it could improve students IELTS scores by providing increased contextualization and exposure to language useful for the test.

## Course Design

The design of the course was influenced by the pilot of Mabe and Selman (2024) but some different choices in course design were made. During the pilot study it was decided not to use a coursebook for IELTS SAP 2. They recognised the advantages of textbooks having model questions and answers based on the latest IELTS tests, advice and strategies for completing the test and practice opportunities. However, they thought the disadvantages of using a book such as cost and inability to cover a sufficient amount of the book during the course as out-weighting the advantages. They instead chose to use online materials as they could be accessed freely. They noted that online materials have the disadvantage of not being adapted to the level of and therefore being too difficult for lower-level learners. This could however be advantageous as language and content would be in its authentic context, a key feature of CLIL teaching materials.

It was decided to use a textbook in class due to the advantages outlined and to recognise the validity of traditional approaches to exam preparation courses. Although a more learning-oriented approach to class work is desirable, if the teacher were to ignore students' needs to familiarise themselves with the exam task types and themes this would arguably hinder students test performance. The impossibility of being able to cover a significant part of the book is a real concern, however the book chosen 'Mindset for IELTS Level 2' is suitable for self-study and could be a useful resource for students.

It was planned to utilise the coursebook for 50-minutes of class time following a 15-minute homework discussion activity. Pages were chosen to introduce students to the different task types in the test and cover a range of themes commonly used in the test. The remainder of the class had the teacher present study abroad related audio and written material, echoing the IELTS textbook themes, following a soft-CLIL approach. This was to be followed

by homework in which students were asked to find related materials to discuss at the beginning of the following class. The study abroad element was seen as following a soft-CLIL approach as authentic materials were used, for example newspaper articles, documentary clips, and news reports. Support was given to aid student comprehension such as warm-up exercises and presentation of essential lexis. Students were expected to discuss materials, aiding each other in comprehension. Authentic materials were selected that were seen as useful for IELTS test takers, such as material featuring the discussion of visual data which is often demanded in IELTS writing task 1. The curriculum was posted on the Rikkyo university course website for students to consider when choosing elective classes (Rikkyo University, n.d.).

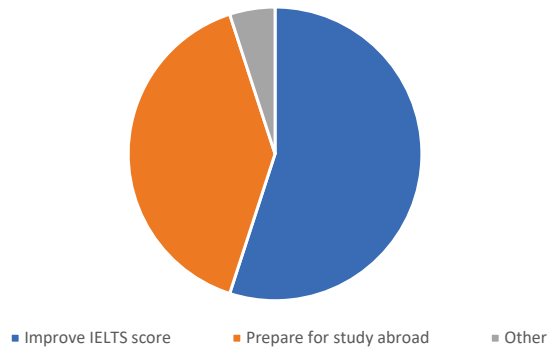
Course design was carried out with reference to The Language Triptych and The 4Cs. *Language of learning* was present in the pre-teaching elements of the study abroad parts of the class. *Language for learning* was assumed as all students had taken part in Rikkyo University first year English classes, the teacher was aware of such language taught and could refer to it when needed. *Language through learning* was expected through the discussions following exposure to materials in which they were expected to consolidate meaning. Students would further consolidate understanding when searching for their own thematically related materials. The *content* element of the 4Cs was addressed by students being presented with information related to study abroad in class. *Cognition* was present as students were expected to find their own related material from an authentic source such as a newspaper website. *Communication* was included in discussions of presented material and material students found themselves. *Culture* was addressed as students were searching for material in its original cultural context and cultural notions students may struggle with were explained in warm-up exercises before material was presented.

## Research

Research was done to investigate students' perspectives concerning course design. Research was carried out on 20 male and female students in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Rikkyo University. Permission to research was obtained according to institutional procedures. Students were asked why they took the course to determine whether the course was in accordance with their perceived needs. The second question addressed what they felt was most useful about the course. Whether the balance was deemed correct was investigated in the third question. In addition, students were asked whether they thought the mix was effective. Finally, they were questioned about whether the course helped them achieve their learning goals. In addition to being asked to respond affirmatively or negatively, students were given chance to comment if they wished.

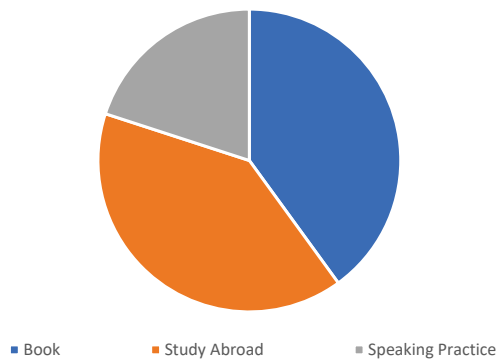
**Figure 1**

*Why did you take the course?*



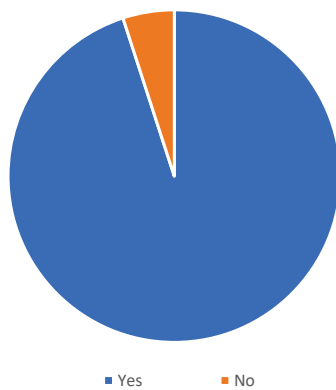
**Figure 2**

*What was most useful about the course? E.g. bookwork, study abroad content*



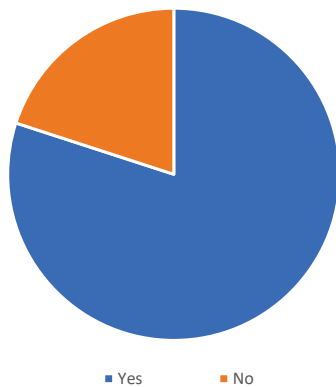
**Figure 3**

*Did you think the balance between book based IELTS practice and self-study content was right?*

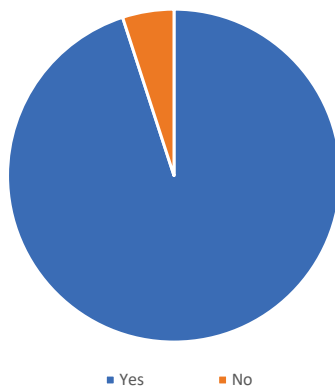


**Figure 4**

*Is the mix of book based IELTS practice and content based learning effective (complement each other)?*

**Figure 5**

*Did the class help with your learning need and goals?*



As seen in Figure 1, just over half of students (11) said they took the course to improve their IELTS score, with 9 saying their reason was to prepare for study abroad and 1 wanting to improve their general English ability. Concerning what students found most useful about the course as illustrated in Figure 2, 8 said that class time spent on IELTS exam bookwork was most useful, with 8 students noting this allowed them to practice the exam tasks and two saying they could receive useful tips. 8 students said they found the study abroad (CLIL) part of classes most useful with 3 students commenting that the self-study homework encouraged them to read articles they would not have otherwise sought. 4 students said that speaking practice was most useful, this could relate to either the IELTS book or CLIL parts of the classes as both featured speaking practice.

When asked about their perspective on the balance between IELTS bookwork and CLIL (Figure 3), 19 of the 20 students said the balance was right. The student who did not respond positively, said the bookwork in class was not necessary as this could be done at home. One student commented that the balance was good as only bookwork would be boring. Other



students supporting the balance, mentioned the practice activities in the book as useful for them. When asked if students felt the mix of CLIL and IELTS was effective (Figure 4), 16 replied positively and 4 negatively. One student who replied negatively said they would prefer an IELTS-only course. Concerning whether the course helped with students learning goals (Figure 5), 19 answered affirmatively with the negative responder saying they would have liked more time to be spent on practicing for different IELTS tasks.

Overall it seems reasonable to suggest the results indicate decisions made during course design were correct. There was a roughly even split between those taking the course due to a primary purpose of either IELTS or study abroad preparation. It seems fair to argue this justifies the choice to use an IELTS coursebook in class. This would be a useful resource for anyone interested in taking the IELTS test, and arguably useful for those who were not primarily concerned with IELTS as they would need to take the test to study abroad. Moreover 8, or nearly half of the group indicated bookwork as the most useful use of class time. Another 8 indicated that the CLIL element of the class was most useful, this seems logical as it mirrors students' reasons for taking the class. However, the vast majority of students said they felt the division of class time between IELTS and CLIL was appropriate. Indicating that although their primary motivation may be IELTS or study abroad preparation, they found the other role of the class useful. A majority felt the different elements of the class were useful, further justifying the balance and the choice to balance book work with CLIL based content teaching. It seems reasonable to presume in such a dual-role course, some students will prioritize one role and may be frustrated that they cannot focus on their preferred element most. It seems the balance adopted went some way to mitigate this problem.

## Conclusion

From review of literature and research into student perspectives, it seems reasonable to suggest Rikkyo university's decision to combine IELTS and study abroad preparation using a CLIL approach was appropriate for the class concerned in this paper. Previous research suggests CLIL study can have a positive effect on IELTS scores and contributes to a learning-oriented approach to exam preparation. The majority of students in the research outlined in this paper found study abroad topic-based CLIL activities to complement their IELTS study. However, it is the view of this author that although CLIL has benefits, traditional approaches to exam preparation should not be abandoned completely. Over half of the research participants were primarily motivated by the need to improve IELTS scores and nearly half indicated the time spent with the coursebook as the more useful element of the class. In fact, only one participant indicated any dissatisfaction with using the book in class. There is a real need indicated by students for familiarisation with the test, test advice and practice. It seems reasonable to suggest that when preparing students for the IELTS test, CLIL is one approach available to the teacher and should be balanced appropriately with explicitly teaching the test. Perhaps over a longer



course, the balance could be slowly weighted towards CLIL, but in a short course such as the SAP: IELTS 2 course, a more equal balance seems appropriate.

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