

Integrating Content and Language in a CLIL Psychology Course: Five Tenets of Good Practice

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Abstract

By definition, content and language integrated learning requires teachers to manage a difficult balance: they must develop content knowledge alongside language skills without either being overtly prioritised. For numerous reasons, such a balance is not easy to achieve in practice. With particular regards to linguistic content choices, teachers need to consider both the quantity and quality of the instruction that they provide. Teachers may provide too little or too much language, or they may focus too heavily on vocabulary at the expense of language form. In this report, I describe five holistic tenets that guided my planning and implementation of a CLIL course in the 2024 academic year. The tenets related to my decisions regarding content and language foci, and also to the overall manner in which I taught the classes. I describe each tenet along with its rationale and provide illustrative examples from the curriculum and two specific lessons that were taught on the course.

Keywords: *CLIL, Course design, Language and content integration*

Introduction

Planning for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is inherently more complex than planning regular language classes. This is because, by definition, CLIL requires teachers to not only be cognisant of improving students' language skills, but also of ensuring they develop specific content-related knowledge, cultural awareness, and the ability to think, speak, and write critically about complex topics. This is no small task indeed! I have taught content integrated lessons for eight years in various tertiary institutions in Japan. In almost all cases, the content in my classes has been connected in some way to the topics of psychology, language learning, and emotions, and I am fortunate in that I have a professional specialism in educational psychology in addition to more than 15 years of language teaching experience. Despite these facts, however, my journey from a language teacher to a CLIL teacher has not been without issues, and in my early career I had particular difficulty balancing my teaching of content and language in CLIL courses. This is something which I have endeavoured to improve in recent years.

The purpose of this short paper is to describe my proactive approaches to integrating

content and language satisfactorily within my teaching of a CLIL course in the 2024 academic year. I focus my discussion on five holistic tenets that I followed during planning and implementation and illustrate these tenets using examples from a two-lesson sequence that focused on positive psychology.

Questions of Content and Language Integration: Quantity and Quality

I am not alone in facing difficulty in integrating content and language, and this remains a recurring theme within CLIL literature. On this point, two questions have repeatedly been considered. The first is the degree to which either content or language should be prioritised given the limited amount of class time in most CLIL settings (Mac Gearailt et al., 2021; Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). This question is perhaps driven by the reality that most teachers come from a background that is either focused on content or focused on language, but rarely both (Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). It is an important issue not only because it influences planning and implementation choices, but also because it influences teachers' classroom identities (Mehisto, 2008). Furthermore, the priority of language or content is not a question limited to teachers. Mehisto (2008) makes the astute point that students are also not used to studying both language and content within the same class period; thus, teachers have to take into account the histories, needs, and expectations from students with regards to this balance.

A second question that has been discussed relates more specifically to the kind of linguistic support that should be provided in any CLIL course. Linguistic goals are complexly wed to the ability, demeanour, and age of the students in the classroom, to the requirements of the chosen texts and materials, and to the overall outcomes expected by institutions. Perhaps the most valuable solution to this issue is Coyle et al.'s (2010) language triptych, an organising tool from which teachers may make appropriate linguistic-study choices in relation to the language *of* learning (language related to the subject under study), the language *for* learning (language required to achieve the goals of the class) and language *through* learning (emergent language experienced within the lesson). This tool, however, may not be sufficient by itself to ensure that teachers make appropriate choices. Important research by Baecher et al. (2013), for example, suggests that language teachers who are training as new CLIL teachers have an overt preference for writing linguistic goals that focus on vocabulary or language subskills (e.g., general strategies for reading and writing improvement) at the expense of those that target grammatical improvement. Teachers should therefore be mindful that students are receiving sufficient instruction on language form.

Proactive Tenets to Integrate Content and Language

During the 2024 academic year I made particularly strong efforts to integrate content and language systematically in a course entitled *CLIL Seminars: Psychology*. In accordance with the goals of the department (see Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021), the course offered an accessible

exploration of topics and issues within the field of psychology whilst also enabling students to undertake more complex psychology-related study if required or desired. I now wish to detail five tenets that guided me during the preparation and implementation of this course. These tenets were holistic decisions that enabled me to feel more confident in my language and content integration. In my explanation, I discuss the course on a curriculum level as a whole, and also include specific examples from two lessons of the course which focused on the topic of positive psychology.

Tenet 1: Offer Two-Lesson Sequences

An important decision that I took in planning the course was to move from single-lesson to two-lesson sequences. This meant that instead of changing the central topic of learning each week, I kept the same topic for two consecutive classes. In the first lesson of each sequence, the students studied an overview of a chosen area of psychology (a broad focus), and in the second class they studied one particular aspect of this area in depth (a narrow focus).

My thought process of moving to a two-lesson sequence was driven by my desire to simplify. Studying four or five topics in a semester is cognitively less demanding than studying nine or ten. Moreover, two-lesson sequences afford repetition in relation to language, concepts, and knowledge, aiding comprehension and retention.

To exemplify such a two-lesson sequence, in my positive psychology unit I taught lessons that focused on, firstly, the history, goals, and criticisms of positive psychology (the broad focus), and secondly, how emotional language can impact well-being (the narrow focus). Thus, the general language and content points raised in the first lesson (e.g., resilience development and key vocabulary items), became recycled and utilised in an important example from the field in the second lesson.

Tenet 2: Offer Opportunities for All Four Skills in Every Lesson Sequence

The second tenet I followed concerned the range of language skills that the students would be asked to utilise during each two-lesson sequence. As an experienced and trained language teacher, I believe strongly that regular practice in all four skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) is crucial (see e.g., Nation, 2014). In addition, targeting all four skills is likely to provide students with a sense that their linguistic skills are being taken seriously. With this in mind, I made a conscious decision to include activities using all four skills within each two-lesson sequence of the course.

To exemplify, during my lessons on positive psychology, content was delivered through both reading texts and live lectures (provided by me). Students were asked to spend 7-8 minutes writing at the beginning of every class, and they were also expected to complete written assignments for homework. Interactive discussion activities were used repeatedly throughout each class to ensure that students had the opportunity to practice actively speaking about the topics they were studying.

Tenet 3: Target Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, and Pragmatics Within Every Lesson Sequence

As was explained earlier in this paper, there can be a tendency for CLIL teachers to focus on vocabulary at the expense of other important linguistic skills (Baecher et al., 2013). To counter this point, I made a conscious effort to attend to a variety of linguistic skills within each language sequence, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatics.

In my two-lesson sequence on positive psychology, the students studied varied language skills. In the first lesson, they were explicitly taught the meaning of key vocabulary (e.g., well-being, resilience, wellness industry), and they learnt the pronunciation and pragmatic-usage differences between two nouns, ‘whiner’ and ‘grouch’ which appeared in a class reading. Later in the lesson, the students studied a series of adjectives relating to criticism of evidence (e.g., lacking, outdated, insufficient), and they categorised this language according to whether it targeted the quality or quantity of evidence. In the second lesson, the students studied the grammatical forms that emotion language takes in English (such as an opinion form, emotion form, and noun form), and were taught that emotion word form choices are dictated by the verb being used. The students also considered the pragmatic differences in the ways that the words ‘nostalgic’ and ‘ashamed’ are used in English in comparison with the ways the words 懐かし (natsukashii - nostalgic) and 恥ずかしい (hazukashii - ashamed) are used in Japanese, and we confirmed the word stress of the emotion word content (as opposed to the stress of the word content, relating to subject matter).

Tenet 4: Be Both Proactive and Reactive With Regards to Linguistic Content Choices

Choosing the linguistic content to focus on is never easy, but my fourth tenet was to ensure that linguistic choices were both proactive and reactive. In other words, I included linguistic content driven by my own expertise as a language teacher, and also in response to the linguistic output of students.

In relation to the language choices in my two-lesson sequence on positive psychology, my choice to target the grammar of emotional language was driven by my professional observation that these structures are often misused by Japanese learners of English, while my decision to explore the pragmatics of the word “ashamed” was driven by my observation that the students used this word inappropriately during an in-class discussion.

Given the complexity of the linguistic and content needs being addressed in CLIL courses, planning is crucial. Personally, I appreciate and use the graphic organising system recommended by Coyle et al. (2010). Broadly speaking, the purpose of this planning method is to encourage teachers to consider every stage of their course and lesson in detail, whilst also allowing them space to locate all four of the key CLIL skills: content, communication, cognition, and culture. For my psychology course, I created graphic organisations of each of my two-lesson sequences, which supported me to consider deeply the language students would require. I also employed a regular short survey, usually placed at the end of fortnightly

homework, through which I could learn more about any linguistic points that the students were interested in studying.

Tenet 5: Follow the Same Procedure in Every Lesson

Finally, one of the most important decisions that I made in preparation for this CLIL course was in my decision to follow standardised procedures for every lesson. My inspiration for this choice emerged from my reflections on ideas promoted by Ball (2018). Summarily, Ball suggests that teachers consider the complexity of their concepts (i.e., content), procedures (i.e., instructions), and language to make CLIL classes as accessible as possible. When complex concepts and language are being studied, teachers should consider lowering the procedural complexity of the tasks. Similarly, when complex activity procedures are required, the conceptual and language requirements should be simplified. In the case of my course, adopting a standardised lesson procedure meant that learners would be afforded more cognitive resources to tackle complex concepts and language. Accordingly, each of my lessons followed the following seven stages:

1. *Review and warm-up.* Each class began with a review and warm-up activity. Typically, students were asked to review previous material and to take part in a discussion or small psychological test to introduce the topic of the class.
2. *Thinking about the topic.* The second stage of the lesson gave the students time to reflect on lesson themes and to explore their ideas in both writing and discussion. The students were given a key question (or series of key questions) to consider for 7 minutes in writing before sharing in groups.
3. *Studying language.* At this stage, important language points were overtly presented to the class. The students were given various interactive tasks to complete in relation to the language points to aid understanding. The language points typically supported students to access the content in stage 4 of the lesson.
4. *Studying content.* After studying language, the students were provided content input through authentic and modified texts, videos, and live lectures (depending on each individual class). The students were provided with interactive tasks to aid comprehension and uptake.
5. *Discussion.* The students considered discussion questions targeting their comprehension and opinions of the content. The questions supported the students to check their understanding and to think critically and reflectively about what they had learnt.
6. *Applying new knowledge.* Here, students were challenged to use their new knowledge to develop more critical considerations of what they had learnt. In my lessons on positive psychology, for example, the participants constructed a list of criticisms of the well-being industry based on their reading and their experiences in Japan (lesson 1),

and they created new emotional language to account for complex emotional experiences in their lives (lesson 2). By completing such activities, the students could move past a surface-level understanding and recognise how the content could apply to real-life situations.

7. *Reflection*. The final stage of the class was an opportunity for students to reflect on the things they had learned through either writing or discussion.

Concluding Remarks

In this short paper I have attempted to illustrate the issues that teachers face when integrating content and language in CLIL courses, and I have described five tenets that guided my own approach in a CLIL course on psychology in the 2024 academic year. These tenets gave me a sense of reassurance that the lessons I taught were attending to both content and language in a meaningful way. I believe that strong guiding principles can be effective in supporting teachers to plan and manage learning, particularly in courses that they are designing themselves from the ground up. The move from teaching language-focused classes to teaching content and language integrated classes requires many adjustments, and I strongly advocate that teachers form their own principles which have relevance and meaning to the courses that they are responsible for teaching.

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