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# Integrating content with English language education in Japan: The perspectives of in-service and trainee teachers

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## **Abstract**

Senior high school English education in Japan has traditionally focused almost exclusively on teaching language in isolation and has rarely integrated content-based learning. Recently, however, the Japanese government and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) have urged teachers to integrate more content into the curriculum as a means of improving the quality of English language education and to further globalize Japanese senior high school students.

The study presented here investigated the practices and experiences of in-service teachers and trainee teachers and analyzed their perspectives of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The first finding is that the in-service senior high school English teachers in this study are actively moving beyond teaching language in isolation. The second finding in this study shows that current trainee teachers are still receiving almost no instruction in their university courses on how to construct or implement a CLIL-based curriculum or lessons. In response to these findings, an intensive workshop was organized and conducted, from which feedback and reaction is detailed.

## 1 Introduction

***“If CLIL in Europe is a toddler, CLIL in Japan is a new-born baby, but it is slowly and steadily crawling forward in Japanese education.”***

*(Ikeda et al, 2013, p. 1)*

The term CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) was adopted as a bilingual educational approach in Europe in 1994 (Coyle et al., 2010) but the basic principle dates back many years, and overlaps with similar (but different) terms such as ‘content-based instruction’ or ‘content-based language teaching’ (Pinner, 2016), or even ‘valued added English’ where “students are learning content through English, whose value is beyond English” (Murphey, 2013, p. 1). This paper adopts a simple definition of CLIL: “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 1). Coyle et al. (2010) further operationalized this definition by emphasizing the importance of the four “C”s in a framework for CLIL: cognition, content, communication, and community (culture).

Senior high school English language education in Japan has traditionally focused almost exclusively on teaching language in isolation and has only recently begun to integrate CLIL. Sasajima (2013) has reported that CLIL is slowly being implemented into language education in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in Japan (see also Tsuchiya & Perez Murillo, 2015). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been actively stressing “the importance of communicative English learning” (Koike, 2016, p. 70) through several of their recently implemented policies. This communicative push by MEXT is embodied in the 2013 course of study for upper secondary language education, which requires language activities to be conducted in English.

Despite the good intentions of MEXT, a tangible problem that remains is that support and training for teachers is often still lacking – especially in CLIL. As Pinner (2013, p. 54) summarizes: “Although the educational policy and instructional methodology being used in Japan to teach English is often being revised to introduce better practice, teachers and institutions are rarely given enough support to implement them fully, and thus there remains a gap between what should be happening and what is happening in language classrooms.” Ohmori (2014, p. 45) further explains: “the approach is still new to many teachers

in Japan”. She then summarizes her view and states (p. 48): “One reason that CLIL is worth spreading is because it is an approach that is the aggregation of ideas from various approaches in bilingual education” and that it “creates a shift in people’s minds that, for instance, both content and language can be dealt with in one class or one course; both can be pursued and be assessed. What is important in Japan at this stage then is to spread the ideas and practices through lectures, workshops, and writing”. Ikeda et al. (2013, p. 1) advocate “CLIL can play a role in positively influencing the current situation in Japan, as elsewhere, with respect to language learning, and education in general. Indeed, the potential of CLIL is recognized by many English teachers who have taken part in CLIL teacher training sessions recently in Japan.”

A plethora of recent studies on CLIL have revealed positive findings for Japanese learners, particularly in the university context. One such study showed that learners held a favorable view of CLIL because it helped them improve “L2 and associated skills such as presenting, summarizing, reflection and discussion” (Lockley, 2014, p. 165). Pinner (2013) also showed that authentic materials used in combination with CLIL could enhance motivation amongst learners, while Godfrey (2013) found that a CLIL-based curriculum at a Japanese university fostered greater motivation in learners and in educators.

While the findings in Japanese university contexts have been favorable for CLIL, much less is known about the senior high school context. The study documented here seeks to begin addressing this gap in the literature by first comparing the practices of in-service teachers with the experiences of trainee teachers, specifically relating to their perspectives of CLIL.

## 2 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design. The participants (n=11) were drawn from a teacher-training workshop held by the researchers and were a combination of in-service teachers and trainee teachers. The trainee teachers were all university students, while the in-service teachers were all English teachers at various senior high schools in the Tokai area of Japan. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the eleven participants and their relevant backgrounds. Each participant has been given an acronym and is listed along with the grade(s) they are

currently responsible for teaching in their senior high school or the year of studies they are currently in at university.

Table 1. The Participants

In-service teachers		Trainee teachers	
Participant	Grade(s) being taught	Participant	Year in university
MS	3	AO	4
MK	1-3	NK	3
NS	1-3	YM	4
TS	2	KS	3
MO	1-3	NW	3
YK	1		

At the end of a teacher-training workshop, the participants were allotted approximately 20 minutes to fill out a questionnaire, regarding their views on the workshop. For a full breakdown of the questions asked, refer to Appendix 1. Question three asked the participants: “Do you think content-based instruction helps students learn English more effectively? How much emphasis do you place on content in your classes?” The participants were free to respond in any form. Once the questionnaires had been completed, the participants submitted them to the researchers and the responses were then sorted and categorized through thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013), and then analyzed through grounded theorization (Charmaz, 2014). All the direct quotations from the participants that are included in Section 3 ‘Findings’ will have the participants’ acronyms attributed to them.

### 3 Findings

The data revealed two significant findings. The first finding was that the in-service teachers were all acutely aware of what CLIL entailed and they were all positive in their comments about it. The second finding was that the trainee teachers for the most part did not attempt to answer question three.

When writing about their perspectives on CLIL, all the responses given by in-

service teachers were positive. As one participant explicitly stated: *“Definitely yes! I have been implementing CLIL into my teaching context for four years, and the learners have developed their language proficiency enough to pass high level language proficiency tests”* (NS). Another participant (TS) responded similarly: *“Absolutely. I put a lot of emphasis on the content.”* A third participant hedged their comments slightly, by explaining that: *“Yes, I think content-based instruction is more effective if the teacher uses proper textbooks or materials”* (MS). She then commented further that: *“I use textbooks during my class, and I think I emphasize the content.”* The other three in-service teachers were relatively less supportive of CLIL, although still positive overall. One of these participants explained: *“I think content is important, but it is more important to think and learn about using English.”* Another teacher (YK) seemed to agree and noted that: *“the content of the textbook is important, but I think that other materials or activities are more important for students to have an interest in the course.”* The final comment from an in-service teacher was somewhat confusing as she stated that: *“Yes. I don’t place too much emphasis on the textbook. Even though I use English textbooks, I choose the lessons I use.”* From this comment, we can deduce that she is in favor of a CLIL-based approach, but seems to prefer a degree of autonomy when deciding exactly what the content of the lesson is.

As stated earlier, the responses to question three from the trainee teachers were almost all blank. In fact, only one (YM) actually wrote a response: *“It depends on the student’s level.”* Even this limited response suggests a cautious view of CLIL and one that implies the view that CLIL is effective for higher-level students. The other four participants all asked the researchers what CLIL was during the response time, and then appeared to be unclear or to not have sufficient experience or background knowledge to comment on it. This lack of knowledge would suggest a gap in their training. Several of these trainee teachers indicated (when answering question two) that they were interested in learning more about CLIL. YM stated that he would like to know more about how to *“balance out knowledge-based lectures and activities/exercises like active learning.”* while KS wanted future workshops to help him gain *“further knowledge about teaching technology, and intercultural communication.”*

Based on the responses obtained in this study, it can be said that the in-service teachers were aware of CLIL and were largely of the opinion that it was effective and even necessary for teaching English. On the other hand, the trainee teachers

were mostly unaware of CLIL, suggesting a problematic gap in their training program that needs addressing.

## 4 Implications

The major implication of this short study is that trainee teachers firstly need more instruction and training on what constitutes a 'CLIL-based' approach. Trainee teachers also need training on how to implement a CLIL-based approach in the classroom before they graduate and also when they become in-service teachers.

The first step to addressing this problem is to implement changes to the teacher-training process and to ensure that CLIL is covered from both a theoretical perspective and from a practical perspective. The second step is to conduct teacher-training workshops in the future that focus on CLIL. The third and final step is to determine if and how current in-service teachers learned about CLIL and to ensure that new in-service teachers are aware of this avenue.

One teacher-training program that may provide a useful template for future teacher-training workshops is the "Tokyo Project" summer program conducted annually at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. This program provides a one-month training program for in-service junior and high school teachers of English, from the metropolitan Tokyo area. According to the program director Professor Scales, the key component to promoting a CLIL-based approach in the classroom is to focus on certain underlying values, instead of random content topics. These values are then intertwined with linguistic objectives to construct a curriculum. This type of approach is used in the Tokyo Project teacher-training program and is advocated by Professor Scales as a way to conduct CLIL in junior and senior high school classrooms in Japan.

Ikeda (2013) provides a cautionary warning when addressing the feasibility of implementing CLIL in Japan:

In the mainstream context (e.g. state secondary schools), curricular subjects are taught by Japanese content teachers in their first language. The possibility of those teachers teaching their subjects in English is very slim: many English teachers are struggling to teach in English, much less content

teachers with their average English proficiency level of probably A2 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) scale. In other words, the ‘string’ version of CLIL (i.e. subject lesson taught by Japanese content teachers is unrealisable in the present circumstances, at least until sufficient linguistic training, appropriate teaching materials and language assistants are available to compensate for limited teacher skills). (Ikeda, 2013, p. 33)

Ikeda argues that ‘a more realistic model’ that Japan could follow is a ‘weak’ version of CLIL i.e. one in which trained language teachers teach both content and English using CLIL (2013, p. 33). Regardless of the CLIL model that Japan follows, it is imperative that teachers are given enough support to help them select the appropriate approach for their specific circumstances.

## 5 Conclusion

While CLIL may have received plenty of attention in the research literature in recent years, this focus seemingly has not been extended to the senior high school English teaching context in Japan. Despite this gap, this study revealed that current in-service senior high school English teachers are acutely aware of CLIL and are in fact utilizing it in their classrooms. Unfortunately, current trainee teachers do not seem to be aware of CLIL or how to implement a CLIL-based approach in their classrooms. Further research is needed to address this issue.

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