

CLIL in Elementary Schools in Japan: Challenges and Opportunities

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This paper takes a critical look at Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an educational movement that has grown popular in Europe, and discusses its possible application in elementary schools in Japan. The first part of this paper will focus on describing what CLIL is, including some practical implications for the classroom. The second part of the paper will focus on some difficulties that would need to be overcome before successfully implementing CLIL in the Japanese primary educational system. Finally, the paper will outline some possible advantages of CLIL.

What is CLIL?

CLIL, a term that was first coined in 1994, is an educational approach focusing on both the target language and regular curriculum content, merging foreign language learning with that of learning in the broader school curriculum. (Iannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2011) describe CLIL as follows:

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is the most common term used in the European setting to describe the approach to teaching a curriculum subject through a foreign language, with the dual focus of acquiring more subject knowledge and improving one's skills and competences in the foreign language (p. 5).

CLIL advocates argue that the expansion of English education beyond the traditional EFL classroom will enhance foreign language learning, typically English, without impeding learning in subject content.

This dual focus on both the target language and the content requires a flexible integration of both L1 and L2 in response to contextual demands, that would presumably include factors such as content difficulty and learner levels. Advocates of CLIL recognize that this very flexibility has led to some varieties of CLIL and terms such as 'soft' vs 'hard' CLIL, 'light' vs 'heavy' CLIL, 'partial' vs 'total' CLIL, and 'bilingual' vs 'monolingual' CLIL (Ohmori, 2014) that, while accurately reflecting the demands of diverging educational contexts, threaten to obscure it to the point where it can no longer be distinguished from other methodologies. Broca (2016) notes this lack of agreement.

Surprisingly, even after over a decade of research and discussion, the basic tenets of CLIL are not agreed. What apparently sets CLIL apart from the non-CLIL teaching is that in CLIL lessons, there is a dual focus on both the content and the FL (foreign language), although beyond this, there is considerable debate on other core characteristics of CLIL programmes (p. 321).

Perhaps precise and exacting definitions might be impractical, and even counterproductive, given the multiple educational contexts where it has been implemented. This would likely be even more true when taking what has essentially been a European educational trend and applying it to a very different context in Japan. Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2011) recognize that CLIL has become ‘an umbrella term’ for diverging methodologies and offer some ‘defining features’ that are common to all CLIL varieties. The first essential feature is the “principle of being based on an integrated approach where language learning is included in content classes...” (p. 14). The target language is used to facilitate content understanding and vice versa. The second defining feature of CLIL reflects its origin in Europe, as it assumes a context “where socio-linguistic and political setting are widely heterogeneous”. What implications this has for the actual implementation of CLIL is not made clear, particularly for its implementation in a relatively homogenous context, such as schools in Japan. Still, the assumed context of a heterogenous world will resonate with advocates of an education system that prepares young people for an increasingly globalized world. A third distinguishing characteristic is “that it is an approach which promotes the development of learning skills: social, cultural, cognitive, linguistic, academic etc” (p. 15). CLIL is not just about language or content learning, but also the development of higher order thinking and learning skills (Meyer, 2013; Coyle, 2005).

CLIL in Japanese primary education: the challenges

Geographically, linguistically, and culturally, Japan is a very different context than that of Europe, where CLIL originated and became most widespread, and these differences present real difficulties for the transfer of CLIL methodology. Isolated from any other country by a body of water, and by any other English-speaking country by continents and oceans, Japanese are presented with far fewer opportunities to authentically engage in English than is the case in most places in Europe. In addition, the Japanese language is much more removed linguistically from English than European languages. Tsuboya-Newell (2017) and Inagaki (2005) point out that, due to linguistic differences in their mother tongue, Japanese learners can expect to spend much more time learning English than learners that share a similar native language, as do most Europeans. I would argue that the immense challenge of learning English, combined with relatively scarce opportunities for English use, present not only obstacles to eventual English levels attained, but also serve as a motivational barrier to putting in the necessary effort right from the outset. The relative difficulty

of English presents a challenge not only for English learners, but also for CLIL instructors, where much more thought, time and preparation will be needed in preparing content lessons. The ability of students to work with vocabulary not yet learned, and derive the meaning from context, will be much more limited than with speakers of other Romance languages such as German or Greek speakers in Europe. The final hurdle to implementing CLIL in Japan will be cultural and I would argue two overlapping 'cultures' could present hurdles. The 'large C', Japanese culture in general, presents hurdles to embracing an identity as a multi-lingual, cross-cultural communicator, an identity that is best expressed in cultures with strong traditions of multi-lingual ability, such as Scandinavian countries or Singapore. Kumagai (1994) lists a number of cultural aspects of Japan that might make English language learning more difficult in Japan. The fact there are cultural hurdles will come as no surprise to almost any foreign resident of Japan who not infrequently encounter Japanese speakers showing a range of communicative reluctance from nervousness to outright terror when being approached by a non-Japanese, even where the interaction might be initiated in competent Japanese. The 'small c' culture refers to a more specific educational culture and tradition, obviously overlapping with Japanese culture in general, that can present hurdles to developing communicative competence in a second language. It has been decades since the Ministry of Education advocated for a movement away from 'yakudoku' pedagogical methods, where English is taught as an academic subject rather than a means of communication, yet there is still evidence that Japanese schools have yet to fully embrace a more communicative form of instruction (Sakui, 2004; Humphries & Burns, 2015). Their findings confirm rather disappointing experiences I have sometimes had observing teaching practice students majoring in English education where the language of instruction, and the language of the classroom, is almost exclusively Japanese. While I would argue that there still remains a place for translation and L1 instruction in English classes, when Japanese often remains the prominent language of instruction in English language classes can one reasonably expect success in a move towards adopting the medium of English in other content classes? All the difficulties of the Japanese context, including the geographical, linguistic, cultural, and educational culminate in the person of the content teacher, without whose support and participation any broad movement towards adopting CLIL is certainly doomed to failure. Even where there might be some success in getting teachers on board, given the generally lower levels of English communicative competence in Japan compared to Europe, is it reasonable to assume that content learning would not suffer when that content is taught in English?

CLIL in Elementary schools in Japan: the opportunities

It is clear that there are serious, and perhaps even insurmountable, hurdles facing the implementation of CLIL in the primary education system in Japan. However, I would argue that CLIL, despite the evident difficulties, might also present some opportunities. Perhaps counter-

intuitively, I would suggest that the source of these benefits lie in the fact that the hurdles to implementing a successful CLIL program are, by and large, *the very same* hurdles to implementing a more successful language program. This means the implementation of CLIL would offer a structured opportunity to tackling English language learning hurdles that have bedeviled the Japanese education system to this point.

Perhaps the most fundamental hurdle to improving English outcomes in the Japanese education system is practical, the amount of time required to achieve English proficiency. Setting aside for the moment what level of English proficiency is desirable, simple arithmetic paints bleak prospects for the achievement of language learning goals established by the Ministry of Education. Tsuboya-Newell (2017) and Inagaki (2005) came up with a rough estimate of at least 2500 hours of concentrated English exposure and practice to achieve the basic Ministry goals. Even assuming an expansion of English education to begin in the 3rd grade of elementary school Japanese students can expect to get little more than 1000 hours of English education in the public school system of Japan. Even assuming maximum English exposure in those classes, an assumption that remains highly dubious given large classes of up to 40 students and the prevalence of Japanese use that still remains in many English classes, clearly not enough time is being invested to achieve lofty educational goals. While it is probably unrealistic to expect to make up the remaining 1500 hours of English exposure in other content classes, CLIL does offer one opportunity to expand English exposure in the Japanese education system.

The adoption of English as a medium of instruction in regular content classes also offers the opportunity to further promote an educational shift from English as a subject of study to a focus on English communicative ability. While MEXT has been promoting a focus on English communicative ability since its 1989 guidelines (Yoshida, 2003), a survey by MEXT (MEXT, 2010) shows many classrooms falling far short of this communicative goal. Communicative Language Teaching is still sometimes viewed as a less rigorous conversational methodology that is quickly set aside when focusing on the more serious, and tangible, academic goals of preparing students for entrance exams. (Sakui, 2004) These findings resonate strongly with my own experiences viewing teaching practice English classes in junior high school and particularly high school. CLIL offers a structured opportunity for English as a medium of instruction, with a focus on communicative competence, and this could present opportunities for learners and educators. One of the foundational premises of CLIL is rich and relevant input in the form of regular curriculum content. In essence, CLIL provides an opportunity for meaningful English interactions in a country, and educational system, where such opportunities remain limited. Clearly though, it is not the case that subjects are randomly chosen, and the content simply converted to English. CLIL in practice has allowed for the flexible use of both L1 and L2, and typically demands scaffolding of L2 to make it accessible for language learners (Mayer, 2010). Additionally, if regular language classes are

to properly support CLIL in regular content classes, a level of cross-curricular coordination would also be required. Once again, this kind of coordination of language learning content might present opportunities as it offers more immediate relevance and meaning to the language learned in English lessons. The primary school system, where regular content teachers will be increasingly called on to teach regular English classes, might be the ideal place to begin implementing CLIL as the hurdles to coordination across content are less with teachers teaching multiple subjects, and teachers are already faced with the challenge of raising English levels to meet English curriculum changes.

A secondary benefit of implementing CLIL might be a shift in the beliefs and practices of teachers. CLIL would, for most teachers and schools, represent a paradigm shift as Meyer (opt cited) notes,

To truly realize the added value of CLIL, teachers need to embrace a new paradigm of teaching and learning and need tools and templates that help them plan their lessons and create/adapt their materials (p. 296).

CLIL incorporates a number of different teaching methodologies, including CLT, Task Based Learning, and the already mentioned 4Cs framework which puts developing cognitive and learning skills at the center of the curriculum. It is not simply enough for language teachers to adjust the language they teach, nor for content teachers to change they language they teach in, teachers need to adopt the role of language learner models and incorporate students in an interactive language learning process. Meyer (2010) notes that,

...one of the key functions of every CLIL teacher (is that of) acting as a language role-model who actively shows and teachers students how to perform language operation(s) such as analyzing or interpreting pictures, maps, satellite images, video clips or verbalizing complex higher order thinking processes... What is needed for successful learning is an appropriate balance of teacher-directed and learner-directed activities; thus enabling teacher to provide the necessary, modeling, scaffolding and motivation (p. 297).

Sasajima (2013) suggested CLIL may indeed have the potential, at least to a limited degree, to “support EFL teachers in changing their mindset in terms of teaching skills, class activities, language use, materials, cognition/thinking, community, communication, learning content, and assessment” (p. 65). A preliminary study comparing CLIL and non-CLIL classes in an elementary school by Yamano (2013) found some evidence that “CLIL may be able to foster deeper learning of language as it provides students with a cognitively engaging and hence more meaningful learning environment” (p. 25).

MEXT has been advocating an educational curriculum with a focus on globalization for many decades with mixed success (Tahira, 2012). The fourth C in the 4Cs framework is culture or, as Ikeda (2011) suggests, ‘community’ to provide a better fit with contexts outside of Europe, such as that of Japan. Ohmori (opt cited) writes that by providing learners with different community

viewpoints from classroom, to school, country, region and world CLIL encourages a learner to “share one’s experience and opinion in a smaller community to a broader contest where they view themselves as world citizens...” (p. 42). Yamano (2013) writes that introducing a global perspective to a primary school class not only helped to raise students’ awareness but also helped to motivate them to communicate in English. In short, there is significant overlap between the ambitious MEXT goals of promoting English communicative competence as well as global understanding and that of the core concepts of CLIL. One could argue that pursuing CLIL reforms would also help to close the gap between these lofty educational goals and reality.

Conclusion

The introduction of English into regular content subjects in primary schools in Japan might seem, at first impression, an absurdly ambitious goal given the relatively recent introduction of English into the elementary school curriculum. The relative scarcity of English classes throughout the education system, including secondary schools, where English is indeed the primary language of communication would give one further pause. However, this paper has argued that there are reasons to believe that CLIL might be an opportunity to close the gap between ambitious educational goals and the realities of English education as realised in schools and classrooms. Clearly though, it would require serious commitment from teachers, schools, school communities including parents, and MEXT. Support would be needed in terms of teacher training, curriculum development, leadership, and materials. Any broad scale implementation in primary schools would also have to address two legitimate fears. Firstly, it would have to be demonstrated that CLIL is not simply advancing English learning at the expense of content learning. CLIL research has provided some evidence this is possible in the European context (Dalton-Puffer, 2011), but that would also have to be demonstrated to be true in the Japanese educational context. A second concern is that the adaptation of CLIL, and the demands it would make on teachers, could add to an already onerous work load. Numerous surveys such as that described by Sakai (2007) already note the excessive amount of overtime worked by Japanese teachers. It is hard to imagine that the adoption of CLIL, with the paradigm shift it would seem to demand, would not involve more time and effort on the part of teachers. If that were not offset by reduction in other responsibilities, the venture would seem neither fair nor realistic, and ultimately doomed to failure. Sugihara (2017) notes that Japanese teachers devote an unusually large amount of their time to non-teaching duties. A reduction in the hours devoted to these administrative and ‘volunteer’ tasks, primarily school clubs, is one possibility for freeing up teacher time. However, this, of course, would require another paradigm shift at the school level. Perhaps this might be requiring one change too many.

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