

Textbook or CLIL Lessons: A Study of Student Preferences

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Abstract

Interest in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has abounded in Europe since the 1990s and its popularity is also growing within Japan. However, there is relatively little research investigating whether learners hold a preference for CLIL as opposed to more traditional teaching methods. In this study, I present my findings on a research project which investigates whether students prefer utilizing a prescribed textbook or “soft” CLIL/topic-based lessons created by the instructor. The results of the survey administered to 35 first year university students suggest that the learners hold a preference for “soft” CLIL/topic-based lessons as opposed to the assigned textbook to a degree both in terms of enjoyment and how useful they deem them to be in terms of improving their English ability, although it is acknowledged that the data collected is a small sample.

Introduction and Rationale for Research

CLIL in its purest meaning refers to the use of a non-native language as a medium of instruction on a content-based course, for example science or math. In reality, there are many versions. As MacGregor (2015) comments,

CLIL is a flexible and broad term that bridges across well-established teaching approaches, such as content-based instruction (CBI), English for academic purposes (EAP), English-medium instruction (EMI), and full immersion. However, though there are similarities amongst all of these approaches, none are directly equivalent to CLIL. In fact, CLIL may be the most flexible in the way it spreads across a learning continuum, with soft CLIL, giving lots of language support at one end, and hard CLIL, where very little or no language support is given, at the other. (p. 426)

Within my teaching context, the soft kind described above is the only feasible option due to the low-level of ability of my students.

Universities in Japan are also increasingly incorporating CLIL into their English education programs. Brown (2015) estimates from information provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2011 that approximately one-third of Japanese universities are offering CLIL classes, although he comments that the actual number may be higher due to the rigid definition by MEXT of what constitutes a CLIL class (p. 2).

One of the benefits of using CLIL is that students are challenged to a greater extent than conventional skills-based lessons as the exposure to language is broader. Moreover, they simultaneously learn about a different subject area other than English (Bentley, 2010). Research from within Japan has also shown that students appreciate this level of challenge (Brown, 2015). As I have often observed that learners in my own classroom frequently seem to become unenthusiastic about using the textbook as the academic year progresses, I feel CLIL can be a useful method of better engaging student attention.

Research by Yoshihara, Takizawa and Oyama (2015) found that Japanese university students preferred CLIL/topic-based lessons to skill-based language teaching. I chose their study as a basis for my own because their teaching context was similar to mine in that they too were assigned a textbook to use in class but had a degree of freedom to use their own materials in

addition. Furthermore, they focused upon using a “weak/soft” form of CLIL where the primary aim of the lessons is to develop their English ability and knowledge of the subject studied is of a secondary concern (Ikeda, 2013). This approach was more suitable for my learners as they would be unable to comprehend most of the target content without substantial language input and assistance from the instructor.

In addition, the motivation behind this research was based partially upon personal experience. Feedback I received from students from a previous research project concerning gender-inclusive language and gender equality topic-based lessons, combined with my own observations of the students in class, pointed towards a negative reaction from some students to the topic of gender issues (Mabe, 2017). This was especially evident amongst the male students, and thus, I was curious to investigate this further. The students appeared unengaged in the topic and a couple of students even expressed hostility as to why they were being asked to focus upon such a subject. It led me to conjecture that students could feel they were being pressured into studying about a topic by the instructor. The issue of EFL as a kind of colonialization, imposing concepts and language norms from native-speaking English countries upon non-native English speakers has long been discussed (Canagarajah, 1993; Pennycook, 1994). I wanted to investigate my observations further in the light of this to see whether there was any evidence that learners in my classes held such sentiments. Yoshihara (2013) investigated students’ attitudes to learning about topics such as domestic violence/LGBT issues and found they had positive feelings about learning about such topics. However, this contrasted with my own observations from 2017. Bearing the above in mind, the following research questions were posed:

1. Do low level ability students prefer CLIL type lessons or the textbook?
2. Which do they deem more useful in improving their English?
3. Would their low level of ability impact on their ability to understand the content and thus affect their enjoyment?
4. What kind of topics do they enjoy/dislike? Is there any evidence that they feel coerced by their instructor into studying certain topics?

The Study

Participants

The participants were all first-year students studying mandatory daily freshman English courses. Each class period is 45 minutes in length. The students are placed in these classes by an internal placement test and, at my level on the schedule, are roughly of a mid-to-high beginner level with a few students at a pre-intermediate level. The assigned course book is *Four Corners 2*, which is described as having a broad CEF level of A1 to B1. *Four Corners* focusses on all four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, however instructors from the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University are predominantly expected to focus upon developing students' oral communicative ability. Therefore, in my experience, quite considerable supplementation of the textbook is necessary. I use a range of other textbook material, for example *Keynote 1* and *21st Century Reading*, combined with my own materials throughout the year-long course.

Although I teach four Freshman English courses, two of them are taught by a teacher who uses Japanese in class once a week to support students' learning. Therefore, as there was insufficient time for me to cover all the teacher made materials with them, these two classes were not included in my study. This had an unavoidable impact on the data quantity, but the data would not have been an accurate representation had I included it. Therefore, only learners from the Business Faculty and the Urban Innovation Faculty were invited to participate. In total, 35 students took part in the survey, which was administered towards the end of the first semester in 2018. Ten were female and 25 were male. The majority of the students were Japanese.

The Survey

A survey was written in English and translated into Japanese (see Appendix A). It comprised of two sections. Section A was a Likert scale survey written to determine whether the students enjoyed CLIL/topics lessons more than *Four Corners 2* and in addition, if they considered them to be more useful in the development of their English skills (see research questions 1 and 2). As I was concerned that the learners would lose interest in a longer survey, I focused directly upon only speaking and listening skills as these are the skills in which the CELE department is most interested in fostering in class. Questions were rephrased and essentially repeated to check consistency of answers.

Question 6 “*I think my teacher likes using teacher-made/adapted materials more than the textbook*” was written to ascertain whether the learners perceived me as preferring my own materials and therefore possibly having an invested interest in hearing positive feedback about them. The possibility of using the more neutral terminology of “topics” was given due consideration but as the textbook also contains topics, I thought this could confuse the participants as to what they were being asked to compare. Therefore, I opted for “teacher-made/adapted materials” for the sake of clarity and listed the names of those materials on the survey. In addition, I did not refer directly to the materials as my own, therefore they could have been designed by any CELE instructor.

Section B was designed using open-ended questions to discover the topics that were popular, those that were disliked by learners and topics that the students would like to study in future lessons (research questions 3 and 4). In addition, it was hoped that comments regarding the positive and negative aspects of teacher materials would help in gauging the participants’ genuine reaction to them.

As the data was relatively small in quantity and included open-ended questions, the results could be sufficiently analyzed using statistics measurements within Excel documents.

The Teacher-Made/Adapted Materials

There were five lessons in total. “Extreme Sports” and “Gender Equality” were entirely created by myself, using real life online information and audio material. However, due to the low level of my students, it was not always possible to find material that was suitable for their level of proficiency. Therefore, for three lessons, I used a text or audio from a textbook or EFL online service but wrote new comprehension questions and tasks to suit my learners’ level. I also created my own visuals to help with understanding of vocabulary and to generate interest in the topic. The audio for the “Tokyo 2020 Olympics” lesson was taken from a free English language teaching material website named *breakingnewsenglish.com*, the reading for “Earthscraper” was taken from *21st Century Reading* and the video in “Appearance” was a Ted Talk from *Keynote 1*.

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey show that students had a degree of preference for using teacher-made/adapted materials rather than the textbook (see Table 1). In addition, male participants generally felt more positive about the teacher materials than females (see Table 2).

Table 1

Overall Results from Survey

Questions	Mean/Standard deviation
Q1. I generally enjoyed using the textbook more than teacher-made/adapted materials	M: 2.3 SD: 0.9
Q2. I think using the textbook improved my English more than the teacher-made/adapted materials	M: 2.9 SD: 0.9
Q3. I want to study more teacher-made/adapted materials	M: 3.7 SD: 0.7
Q4. Teacher-made/adapted materials improved my speaking more than using the textbook	M: 3.6 SD: 0.9
Q5. Teacher-made/adapted materials improved my listening more than using the textbook	M: 3.4 SD: 0.8
Q6. I think my teacher likes using teacher-made/adapted materials more than the textbook	M: 3.3 SD: 0.8
Q7. I like using teacher-made/adapted materials more than the textbook	M: 3.7 SD: 1

Table 2

Results Compared by Gender

Questions	Males	Females
Q1	M:2.1 SD: 0.9	M: 2.9 SD: 0.7
Q2.	M:2.8 SD: 1	M: 3 SD: 0.5
Q3.	M:3.7 SD: 0.8	M: 3.5 SD: 0.7
Q4	M:3.6 SD: 0.9	M: 3.6 SD: 0.8

Q5.	M: 3.5 SD:0.8	M: 3.1 SD: 0.9
Q6.	M: 3.1 SD: 0.7	M: 3.3 SD: 0.5
Q7.	M: 3.8 SD:1	M: 3.6 SD: 1

On the whole, students disagreed that they enjoyed using the textbook more than teacher-made/adapted materials (M=2.3, SD=0.9). When the data is analyzed in comparison of male and female answers, the result indicates male students enjoy the textbook considerably less than the females (M=2.1, SD=0.9 and M=2.9, SD=0.7 respectively). Question 7 was essentially the same question reversed and the data trends are similar to those of question 1. The overall mean was 3.7 (SD=1) indicating the students enjoyed the teacher materials more than the textbook. Once more, male learners were more positive about the teacher-made materials compared to the females (M=3.8, SD= 1 and M=3.6, SD=1 respectively). Learners generally responded positively that they wanted to use more teacher-made/adapted materials in the future with an overall mean of 3.7 (SD=0.7). The male population was once more a little more enthusiastic (M=3.7, SD=0.8) when compared to female respondents (M=3.5, SD=0.7).

Students did not greatly perceive me as preferring teacher-made materials to the textbook. Overall, the mean was 3.3 (SD=0.8) with no great difference between male and female results. If this result had been a stronger assertion that I as the teacher preferred the teacher-made materials, I would have been more concerned that the learners may have believed that I had an invested interest in hearing positive comments about them and therefore may have unduly influenced their responses. However, I would tentatively suggest from this figure that there is not significant evidence of this.

Turning to how useful the students determined the teacher-made/adapted materials to be in comparison to *Four Corners 2*, there was some evidence that participants valued the teacher-made materials over the textbook. Generally, students did not believe using the textbook improved their English more than using teacher-made/adapted materials with a mean of 2.3 (SD=0.9). When analyzed by gender, the mean of the females was 3 (SD=0.5) compared with 2.8 (SD=1) for the males so these results suggest the females value the textbook somewhat more than their male counterparts, thus supporting the previous data patterns further.

There was also evidence of support for teacher-made/adapted materials value in improving speaking ability. Overall, the mean was 3.6 (SD=0.9) and there was no difference between the male and female participants. The learners felt a little less positive about the impact of the teacher-made materials on their listening prowess with an overall score of 3.4 (SD=0.8). Once more, in fitting with the trend of the data patterns thus far, the male participants felt much stronger than the females about the value of the teacher-made materials in comparison to the textbook. (M=3.5, SD=0.8 and M=3.1, SD=0.9 respectively).

Turning to section B, it should be noted that students often did not comment on Part B or expressed a preference for all the materials and claimed to dislike none of them. However, in total, 33 participants chose a favorite topic, although they often did not explain the reason why they preferred that topic (see Table 3).

Table 3
Student Preferences for Topics

Favorite Topic	Males	Females	Overall Total
Extreme Sports	12	3	15
Gender Equality	4	0	4
Tokyo 2020 Olympics	5	3	8
Appearance	0	3	3
Earthscraper	2	1	3

The “Extreme Sports” lesson was the most popular (15 students). The vast majority of comments pertained to it being “fun” and “interesting.” One student commented: “I could know about such sports in the world” (see Appendix B for full list of comments). The “Tokyo 2020 Olympics” lesson was also popular with eight participants choosing that. One student commented that he liked the topic because it was topical in Japan, another “It’s very interesting for Japanese people.” Interestingly, all four of the participants who expressed preferences for the

“Gender Equality” lesson were males. My expectation was that the females would show more of an interest as the topic is one which directly relates to them. I also expected the topic of “Appearance” to appeal to females more than males as it focused upon female body image issues and in this case, the data matched my expectations; three women chose this as their favorite topic. Only thirteen learners answered the question regarding their least favorite topic.

Table 4
Topics Unpopular with Learners

Least Favorite Topic	Males	Females	Overall Total
Extreme Sports	1	0	1
Gender Equality	1	3	4
Tokyo 2020 Olympics	0	0	0
Appearance	2	0	2
Earthscraper	4	2	6

The least popular topic was the “Earthscraper” lesson (six students) citing that it was too difficult for them. Three females and one male chose “Gender Equality” as their least favorite, once more deviating from my predictions. Reasons given were “I didn’t understand the meaning” and “I’m not interested in it.” This is interesting with regards to the research questions posed at the start of the study, in particular as to whether students feel coerced into studying some topics set by the instructor.

Regarding Question 10 (“*What other topics would you like to study?*”), answers ranged from travel, Disney, the environment and history. It can be seen that a mixture of light and serious topics was chosen and this will aid me in preparation of future lessons. A complete list can be viewed in Appendix C.

Questions 11 and 12 asked participants to consider the benefits and drawbacks aspects of the teacher made materials. (See Appendix D). The vast majority of comments pertained to

the lessons being fun, interesting and easy to understand. Other comments were “I can hear English conversationally naturally” and “native English is written on the original material.”

In terms of negative aspects, four students commented on the number of handouts that they were given and required to keep, which was a factor I had not considered. Five cited difficulty as a bad point. Interestingly, one student did comment “It is not studying style for Japanese.” This suggests that students are aware that the manner in which they are being taught differs from their own culture’s style and is interesting in relation to the research questions I posed at the start. Another learner commented that if the teacher material was included in formal tests, it would be difficult to study for. This was also a factor I had considered and thus, had not included the material on any formal tests as it seemed unfair to test the learners on content knowledge that was not part of the official syllabus. One student mentioned the lack of grammar as a negative point.

Discussion

Overall, the results were similar to those of the research this study was partially modelled upon. There is also an undeniable trend of male students enjoying the teacher-made materials more than the textbook and valuing them more than the female student population. This arguably could have implications for instructors with male-dominated classes. However, the small female data set has an impact in terms of reliability on this feature of the research. Further investigation is needed to clarify this point.

With reference to my previous observations and feedback regarding lessons based on Gender Equality, one can safely suggest from the results that this topic is not overly popular with the student population. Thus, there is evidence to some degree that I as the instructor was imposing this topic upon the learners. Moreover, the data shows that it cannot be assumed necessarily that females will hold an interest in this lesson merely because the topic directly relates to them. With regard to the question of whether CLIL/topic-based lessons are suitable from a cultural point of view within Japan, there was little evidence to suggest that learners felt a teaching style was being imposed upon them as only one student commented on this.

To conclude, although undeniably some learners cited difficulty as a negative aspect, the majority of student comments pertained to the material being easy to understand and fun so I

believe instructors should not be deterred from using “soft” CLIL in classrooms even with low-level learners as it is possible to adapt materials to suit the students. In addition, based on the student comments, it is clear the students enjoy the exposure to more natural English as opposed to what can be at times oversimplified English in textbooks. It is important to remember that while students’ level of ability may be low, the majority have been studying English from textbooks for many years and CLIL can provide them with a refreshing alternative means of study.

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Appendix A

Survey about classroom materials

教科書を使った学習と、先生のオリジナルの教材を使った学習のどちらがいいですか？

Part A:

Please circle which number best represents your opinion. 5 means Strongly Agree, 1 means Strongly Disagree. 自分の意見にもっともあてはまるものに丸をつけてください。5はよく当てはまる、1は全く当てはまらないです。

(Textbook = Four Corners 2. Materials made or adapted by the teacher = Extreme Sports, Gender Inequality lesson, Tokyo 2020 Olympic lesson, Appearance, Earthscraper lesson)

1. I generally enjoyed using the textbook more than teacher-made/adapted materials.

私は先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使う授業よりも市販の教科書を使う学習の方が楽しめた。

1 2 3 4 5

2. I think using the textbook improved my English more than teacher-made/adapted materials.

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使うよりも市販の教科書を使う方がより英語が向上すると思う。

1 2 3 4 5

3. I wanted to study more teacher-made/adapted materials.

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材で学習したかった。

1 2 3 4 5

4. Teacher-made/adapted materials improved my speaking more than using the textbook.

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使う方が市販の教科書を使うよりも自分のスピーキング能力を向上させた。

1 2 3 4 5

5. Teacher-made/adapted materials improved my listening more than using the textbook.

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使う方が市販の教科書を使うよりも自分のリスニング能力を向上させた。

1 2 3 4 5

6. I think my teacher likes using teacher-made/adapted materials more than the textbook.

私の先生は市販の教科書を使うよりも、先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使うことを好んでいると思う。

1 2 3 4 5

7. I like using teacher-made materials/adapted more than the textbook.

私は市販の教科書を使った学習よりも先生が用意したオリジナルの教材を使う方を好む。

1 2 3 4 5

Part B: Write your answer in English or Japanese.

答えを英語か日本語で記入してください。

(Teacher-made/adapted materials = Extreme Sports, Gender Inequality lesson, Tokyo 2020 Olympic lesson, Appearance, Earthscraper lesson)

8. Which teacher-made/adapted material topic did you enjoy the most? Why?

どの先生が用意したオリジナルの教材のトピックが一番楽しめましたか？なぜですか？

9. Which teacher-made/adapted material topic did you enjoy the least? Why?

どの先生が用意したオリジナルの教材のトピックが一番楽しめませんでしたか？なぜですか？

10. What other topics would you like to study?

他にどのようなトピックを学習したいですか？

11. What do you think are the good points about teacher-made/adapted material?

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材の良いところは何か？

12. What do you think are the bad points about teacher-made/adapted material?

先生が用意したオリジナルの教材の悪いところは何か？

Appendix B

List of student comments regarding topics

Lesson	Comments
Extreme sports	“fun and interesting” (7students) “I could know about such sports in the world” “I could find many sports”
Tokyo 202 Olympics	“I enjoyed studying it” “because this subject is trend in Japan” “I like sports and enjoy Olympics” “It’s very interesting for Japanese people”
Earthscraper	“I like earth” “It is very exciting and interesting” “difficult” (4 students) “This subject is too imagination. I can’t feel reality”
Gender Equality	“I didn’t understand the meaning” (3 students) “I am not interested in it” “I was interested in the content” “Something you can use in everyday conversation” “fun”
Appearance	“easy to understand” “Useful” (3 students)

Appendix C

Topics students would like to study in the future

Foreign foods
 Something I don’t know about the world
 Disney books
 Slang
 Travel
 Music
 Life and work
 Countries’ culture
 History (2 students)
 Debates
 Environment
 Cities
 News

Appendix D

List of student comments regarding advantages and disadvantages of teacher-made/adapted materials

Advantages	Disadvantages
“light and easy to understand” “improves my English” “fun” (3 students) “easy to understand (7 students) I can hear English conversation naturally” “Native English is written on the material” “has pictures, easy to see” “worth doing” “interesting”	“a lot of words I don’t know” “a lot of prints” (4 students) “Difficult” (5 students) “It is not studying style for Japanese” “no grammar”