

# The Views of Advanced Learners of English on Content and Language Integrated Learning

Juergen J. Bulach

## Abstract

As a language learning methodology, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become increasingly prevalent at Japanese universities and is viewed by many educators as a positive step toward improving the English proficiency skills of Japanese university students. This educational trend is reflected in Japan's Ministry of Education Global 30 Project that seeks to expand and enhance the number of degree programs conducted in English and to hopefully lead to an increase in the number of international students studying at its institutions of higher learning. In this article, I provide transcriptions of interviews I carried out with four Japanese university students who are highly proficient learners of English and have taken content courses in English and Japanese. The aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of CLIL as seen from the perspectives of students who have actually experienced the methodology firsthand. Although the interviewees expressed positive points about learning various subjects through English, they also stated specific reservations in regard to the implementation of English as the medium of instruction in content courses.

*Keywords: CLIL, English-Medium Instruction, Global 30*

## Background

Content and Language Integrated Learning is an educational approach where students learn content in such diverse subjects as history, literature, geography, math, or biology in a non-native language. An example of this would be Japanese university students learning English literature in a class in which the medium of instruction is English.

First coined by David Marsh in 1994, it is often referred by its acronym, CLIL, and shares many characteristics and considerable overlap with other methodologies

(bilingual education, immersion education, content-based learning, English-medium instruction). According to Marsh, CLIL's aims may vary depending on which model is used such as developing a can-do attitude among students where English is viewed as linguistically remote as in Japan, or developing harmony among ethnic groups, as in Europe (British Council, 2014).

Perhaps the area of the world in which CLIL is most dominant is Europe. CLIL is viewed as the ideal approach due to political and educational reasons. Politically, it is the ideal educational strategy to use for raising levels of plurilingualism in such a linguistically diverse continent and educationally to provide a flexible mainstream education (British Council, 2014).

Europe's success with CLIL is being replicated in other parts of the world, particularly in Japan, where it is being adopted by a number of universities in different formats such as in full-degree programs, partial department programs, and individual classes both at the graduate and undergraduate levels. In 2006, 1/3 of universities in Japan offered EMI courses (MEXT, 2006). At the forefront, of course, are the 13 leading universities that have been selected to promote CLIL in the Global 30 Project.

### **Participants**

The interviewees were four third-year students enrolled in the English Department at the same university in Tokyo. One feature of this department is that students may take content courses conducted in English on a range of subjects. Every interviewee had taken content courses in which the medium of instruction was English. The interviewees were advanced speakers of English at near-native fluency. I refer to the interviewees as Students A, B, C and D.

### **Data Collection**

Each participant was interviewed in English for approximately 15 minutes at mutually convenient times and places. The participants were informed of the purpose of the interviews, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the interviews at any time. I provided them with the interview questions one week before meeting them.

I constructed the following five questions as the basis of the interviews:

1. What is your opinion of non-native speakers of English teaching content courses in English only?
2. What is your opinion of entire Japanese university departments using English as the only language of instruction?
3. What advice would you give Japanese university students who want to take content courses in English?
4. Why do you think there is a trend of offering content courses in English at Japanese universities?
5. What do you think should be the minimum requirements for a non-native instructor to effectively teach content courses in English at a Japanese university?

I recorded the interviews and confirmed the transcriptions with the students to ensure I had accurately represented them.

Before meeting the students, I provided them with a set of self-assessment questions as follows:

- How would you assess your English ability level?
- What is/are your TOEFL / Eiken / TOEIC score(s)?
- Have you ever lived overseas and if, yes, (at what age) when, where and how long?
- How many English content courses have you taken?

I tabulated the students' answers in the following table:

Table 1

Self-Assessment Questions	Q1 English Ability level	Q2 TOEFL TOEIC and/or Eiken Scores	Q3 Overseas Experience	Q4 Number of Content English Courses Taken
Student A	High Advanced	TOEIC 990 TOEFL ibt 98/120	16 years in Fiji	8
Student B	Mid-advanced	TOEIC 945 Eiken pre-1	4 years in the USA (4-8 years of age)	9
Student C	Mid-advanced	TOEIC 935 Eiken pre-1	5 years in the USA (2-7 years of age)	4
Student D	Low-advanced	TOEIC 925 Eiken Pre-1	3 years in the USA & 2 years in the Philippines	2

I decided to include the students' transcriptions in their entirety. Although lengthy, I decided the insights that could be gained into reading the students' comments were more valuable than if I provided only excerpts.

### 1. What is your opinion of non-native speakers of English teaching content courses in English only?

**Student A:** "I think it's ok, but I feel like even in my present experience Japanese people speak more Japanese because they expect the teacher to speak Japanese, so whatever race the teacher is, they assume the teacher should speak in that language and some students feel offended that they don't speak in that because some students may not understand English and they want to explain how they feel to a teacher but when the teacher says to whom, speak in English, they feel kind of upset about it. I think it's fine, but from a student's point of view, they would like a teacher to be able to be bilingual and speak both, like code switch. I think there are a lot of Japanese people, my friends who speak perfect English, better than me, so I think it's fine. It doesn't matter what race you are."

**Student B:** "Well, I know some teachers who speak and use English even though it's not really English teaching content courses and sometimes I feel that they're not really good at English and I don't really get what they're talking about. So I don't think it's a

good idea. Also, I have a friend who is a native speaker of English and goes to another university in Tokyo where English is the only language used, but he said it's tough because the lessons are tough because he doesn't get what the Japanese teachers are speaking."

**Student C:** "I think it's a good idea because it pushes both, the teacher and also the student, to use English because like in Japan in daily life, you don't really have a chance to use English but at the same time, it's also dangerous because it says like it's non-native speakers are going to teach in English and sometimes they don't have, like, enough English skills to really teach and sometimes the students don't have enough, I would say, ability to understand the content and then they don't really learn anything at all so but I think overall it's a good idea."

**Student D:** "I think it's totally ok, because I think some teachers who are native speakers, I mean, they're teachers who are non-native speakers of English teaching English in Japan and also native speakers of English teaching in Japan. Some students prefer teachers who are native, because from their appearance, native speakers are better teaching in English because they are native. But actually some non-native speakers of English, for example, Japanese teachers of English, who are not native in English, but they might teach better because they have studied abroad or lived abroad, so I think it's ok that non-native speakers of English teach in English."

## **2. What is your opinion of entire Japanese university departments using English as the only language of instruction?**

**Student A:** "I think right now it won't be such a good thing. I think in a few years, maybe in five or ten years, because the Olympics is coming up and so English is going to be used a lot. But right now, if it's like basic words, specialty words like in science or in religion, some words cannot be translated back into English in their own content, so I feel like that it's ok to do it, but I think they also need to understand the students on their level so don't rush into it like maybe you can have the content in English, but you can have some explanations in Japanese or whichever language they are. I think a good example is Rakuten, they have an entire company in English but some employees are frustrated with that because they can't fully understand what's happening, so I think the first thing is to get the students to actually take a basic class in English and

then before taking classes in that particular field like science or math in English.”

**Student B:** “Well, actually I don’t really get why they want to use English only for the entire department because as I said before some professors don’t really speak English perfect but because they try to I feel that the level of the course or lesson gets low but because they try to keep up in English but because to make students understand the content, I think the professor has to make it more easy to make it, I don’t know like the questions, the task more easy so, I don’t really get why they have to do everything in English. I think that there should be options.”

**Student C:** “I think it’s not really a good idea because this is Japan and any other country they don’t really have so much in common because, I don’t know, no one would really understand it if it’s all in English. I think it’s also important that you embrace your own English language too before you just push yourself to use English.”

**Student D:** “I think it’s a good idea but I don’t think it’s really effective because many students who want to study English go to English related departments so for those who want to study English it’s a good idea. Right now, not all my classes are taught in English so that system of learning everything in English becomes practical. I think it would be good but I don’t think it will be very helpful for all the departments to teach in English.”

### **3. What advice would you give Japanese university students who want to take content courses in English?**

**Student A:** “I think it’s important to try because a lot of times Japanese people are afraid to speak English, so they don’t and they’re quiet and don’t think they can but I felt that most of my Japanese friends they do speak good English, and even if they don’t speak grammatically perfect, but I fully understand what they are saying, so I feel like they should try. It’s a challenge for them, it helps them to be more active and it gives them a good chance also to learn English and I feel that just try it because unless you try it you won’t know. Just be open to trying it.”

**Student B:** “Well, I think they have to think, one, is who can really speak English like returnees, or natives, who spent most of their lives outside Japan, like my friends.

They have to think that now, like the situation is not good, they think it could be perfect it's not that easy, you might get bored, you don't understand because it's too difficult because you don't really understand what they are talking about and for those who really like English but don't really speak English, then they should really consider if they really can keep up with the others, because, well, it depends on how the university chooses or selects the students for the department. But if they choose based on English levels or other academic abilities and those returnees and non-returnees might get into the same class. Then the levels will get mixed up and I don't think that's good."

**Student C:** "I would advise just to take it, like try it out, I think maybe because it might work for them now. And if it works for them, students like me, like returnees, they would have some opportunities to speak more English in the daily life and I think it's good because you just forget how to use English and for students who want to learn how to use more English because if they are still learning it's really good because you really have to understand the class to follow. I would just say attend the class very, not... how do you say, not passively but you should attend it actively or you won't learn anything."

**Student D:** "I think content courses in English is a little difficult because they have to learn something through language that is not their first language, than their native language. It might be difficult but maybe, of course they shouldn't speak Japanese in those courses because then they won't really improve, I think, so it's difficult but I think advice would be only to use English in the classrooms and not Japanese for both native and Japanese teachers."

#### **4. Why do you think there is a trend of offering content courses in English at Japanese universities?**

**Student A:** "I think there are two main reasons. The first one is because English is the lingua franca of the world it's being used everywhere so people want to attain that and I also can speak English so if I go to another country and I travel abroad I have English so I can speak to other people. But if I go to another country to like Kenya I can't speak to them in Japanese or Swahili but I have English so we can communicate so I think it's a good thing for communication. And another thing like in Asian

cultures they like to have a “must get thing” so if you look at supermarkets they have “kikanngenntei” [a product that is offered only for a limited time] only for that period and English is the must have, everyone wants it. It’s time to change that, if they try it once they’ll see it’s much simpler. I think studying Spanish or Korean is so much harder than English. English I think has a few set of rules, they have less alphabets.”

**Student B:** “As I said, I don’t really get why they are trying to do this. Like the companies, some companies try to make their official language English. But for me, that doesn’t make sense also and that kind of like is the same I guess so I don’t understand why they have to do everything in English. It’s Japanese here and not an international university but I think that why there is this trend is that first of all, I think, now professors and our parents are in their 40s and 50s and their generation. In Japan globalization started and they thought that we have to use English too, I don’t know, to get a better job and then now their students, their kids my age and then they think that English is everything. But I think there are other options, not only English and not only languages.”

**Student C:** “I think it’s because like everyone feels like leftover from the global movement that is going on throughout the world because the English level of Japanese people is not really good, I would say, so I think they are trying to push everyone to learn English and it’s one of the ways to make a class that is all in English and then everyone has to use English.”

**Student D:** “I think there’s a trend because I think the world is becoming more global and not only in Japan but many countries think that English is more, if you can speak English, you can be a more global person. In Japanese universities they’re putting more effort in English and trying to make more students speak English for their future, not just their future, but to make more like global, I’m not sure how to say, global citizens.”

**5. What do you think should be the minimum requirements for a non-native instructor to effectively teach content courses in English at a Japanese university?**

**Student A:** “I feel that with Japanese culture, the school will probably look for



certificates how well you are graded, what's your TOEIC score, TOEFL score. But I think if a person can correct you on your grammar or teach you this grammar is correct, this grammar is wrong, I think that is enough. Because even with the system in my department, some of my friends in the advanced course and some of them in the introductory course but some of the ones in the introductory course can speak better English than the ones in the advanced course. They're not so good with grammar but their speaking is very good. I feel like if you have a good knowledge in speaking English and you're confident and you can correct a student if they make a mistake in English, I think that's fine. If we teach content courses like science or math it's not about how good your grammar is but if you can get the students to understand the content, if you can speak English, that's fine."

**Student B:** "I think the biggest point is how fluent and how accurate you can speak English. I took TOEIC and Eiken but I don't really think they measure English abilities so the best thing is, I think, like teachers like you who is native to test the Japanese professors so if he is in the level to teach in English or else he shouldn't teach English. I mean not teach in English. The thing is in Japan, I don't know about other countries, but In Japan they think I am the professor, I know everything. Even those students who are not very good or understand you, I don't think they really take it seriously. So other teachers like native teachers have to sort out, to decide, select the professors."

**Student C:** "I think that they have enough English skills because, it's not very polite to talk like this, but I had a teacher, a professor who had like a listening class for us, well, it wasn't like an English content course, it was more of an English improving class. She taught all in English but her English wasn't the best so we had difficulty understanding what she wants to say so like the class didn't go so smoothly. And we felt like we didn't really learn anything at all. We basically did it by ourselves. I think it's important that they, they don't have to be perfect, but they should be at least a bit over the average something because they want to teach something so they should know how to talk in English. Also, the students are kind of, learning English from them, not learning but they should use proper English. It's ok that they speak with an accent because it's not like you can change it so well and it's also one thing that you should get used to lots of accents, like English and other accents, too. That's not a problem at all. It's more about grammar and stuff like that."

**Student D:** “I’m not sure if it’s a good requirement but maybe if I think of one, it could be that the teachers need to have experience abroad, either abroad or studied abroad because that affects how they speak. Because if they have only studied English in Japan, I’m not really sure, but maybe their pronunciation can’t be improved that much compared to those who are actually native-speakers in other countries. Really the requirement is experience abroad.”

### **Discussion**

In the following discussion, I examine the interviewees’ answers to each interview question. In answering Question #1, three of the interviewees expressed that they are open to non-native speakers of English teaching content courses in English only. Student A divulged that he would not find it problematic if non-native instructors teach in English but he also made the admission that some students may “feel offended” if the instructor were to do so. Student D commented that non-native teachers might teach better because “they have studied or lived abroad”. At the same time, she pointed out that two students prefer the “native appearance” of native instructors. Student B expressed past difficulties in understanding the English of non-native instructors.

There was also no consensus among the interviewees in regard to Question #2 about their opinions on entire university departments using English as the sole language of instruction. Student A proposed that universities should “not rush into it” but that first there should be foundation courses for students before they study further in English. Student B expressed her belief that there is a danger that an English-only approach might impact the actual content in that it would become too “low”. The instructor would have to adjust content instruction to meet the English proficiency levels of the students. Student C made an interesting comment that “this is Japan” and that you should “embrace your own language”. Student D was the most positive of the four interviewees and thought it is “a good idea” but admitted that an English-only approach might “not be effective” simply because English-only departments are attractive to students who want to learn English and not necessarily the content.

As for Question #3 on what advice would they give Japanese students taking English content courses, there was near consensus (Students A, C and D) among the interviewees that students should just “try”, even if it may be a little “difficult” Student

B cautioned that students should ask themselves if that is what they really want before entering such a program. She went on to explain that there is a risk that they might get bored if they are unable to understand the content.

The answers to Question #4 showed that the interviewees had a range of reasons as to the recent trend of offering content courses in English at Japanese universities. Students A, C, and D replied that it had much to do with English being the global language and that it was an indication that Japan's universities were trying to keep pace with the global movement. Student B, however, commented that it does not make sense and that the trend reflected the move of some companies in Japan that are making English the language in the workplace. She also said that the trend is a holdover from the time when globalization started and that people in their 40s and 50s think possessing proficient English skills is necessary in getting a "better job".

The final question dealt with what the interviewees thought should be the minimum requirements for non-native instructors to effectively teach content courses in English. Student A expressed his view that it was sufficient that instructors be able to teach the content in English and correct students on their grammar now and then, while Student B stated that an instructor's English proficiency cannot be adequately measured by assessment tests such as TOEIC or Eiken and that native instructors should evaluate the qualification levels of non-native instructors. Student C stated that instructors do not have to be perfect but that they should be proficient enough to teach grammar. Student D had an altogether different opinion in that she remarked that the key requirement for non-native instructors should be "experience abroad," because she doubted that instructors who have lived only in Japan would possess reasonable pronunciation skills.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that CLIL is here to stay. It is an effective and proven methodology that offers students unlimited possibilities to improve their second language skills while learning content in a non-language related area. How and where to exactly implement CLIL in Japanese universities remains open to debate, however. Although the number of people for this interview was admittedly small for any valid statistical study, their answers included enough points of concern to warrant further investigation of CLIL's implementation in Japan. If CLIL is to become truly successful

in Japanese universities, it is imperative that educators listen to students who are experiencing CLIL and to address their concerns.

## **References**

British Council. (2014). CLIL: An interview with David Marsh. Retrieved from <http://ihjournal.com/content-and-language-integrate>

MEXT. (2009). Higher education in Japan. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/English/highered/\\_icsFiles/afield-file/2011/02/28/1302653\\_001.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/English/highered/_icsFiles/afield-file/2011/02/28/1302653_001.pdf)