

# An Introduction to the Theory and Application of CLIL in Japan

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## 【研究ノート】

An Introduction to the Theory and Application of  
CLIL in JapanBarry KAVANAGH<sup>1)</sup>\*

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## Abstract

CLIL within Japan is still within its infancy and while it is slowly being incorporated into the curriculum of some universities it is still very much a newcomer to the language teaching methodology table. This paper aims to serve as an introduction to those not familiar with CLIL and give an overview of current CLIL practice and how it has been received by both students and teachers.

## Introduction

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) originated in Europe and is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. CLIL launched in 1994 in conjunction with the European Commission and was based on the observation that mobility across Europe would necessitate a much higher proficiency level in particular designated languages. Marsh (2012) states that the motivation behind it was based on the bilingual initiatives established in Canada and the aim was to design and adapt the current language teaching methodology so that it would reach a wide range of students and provide them with a higher level of competence in foreign languages.

This paper aims to provide an overview of CLIL theory and methodology, including its definition and roots. This will be followed by an overview of the method in Japan and how it has been perceived by students and teachers. Finally, thoughts will be given on how CLIL can be promoted within Japan.

## Definition and roots of CLIL

Graddol (2006) suggests that people are learning languages not just to be bilingual but also to do something with the language. Ball (2016) writes that English has become a vehicle for global communication and that the practical use of speaking different languages along with the cognitive and pragmatic abilities that this might confer is slowly being recognized. This he suggests is an area that the CLIL approach addresses in a setting where the learners do things with the language. Coyle et al. (2010) state that “CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (p.1). They emphasize the importance of cognitive engagement that facilitates effective learning. Activities such as group work, collaboration, problem solving and questioning help students learn the process of “constructing knowledge which is built on their interaction with the world” (p.29). The four C’s of culture, cognition, content and communication can be considered the cornerstones of CLIL that allow for a classroom setting that engages the learner in an environment with clear content and linguistic objectives.

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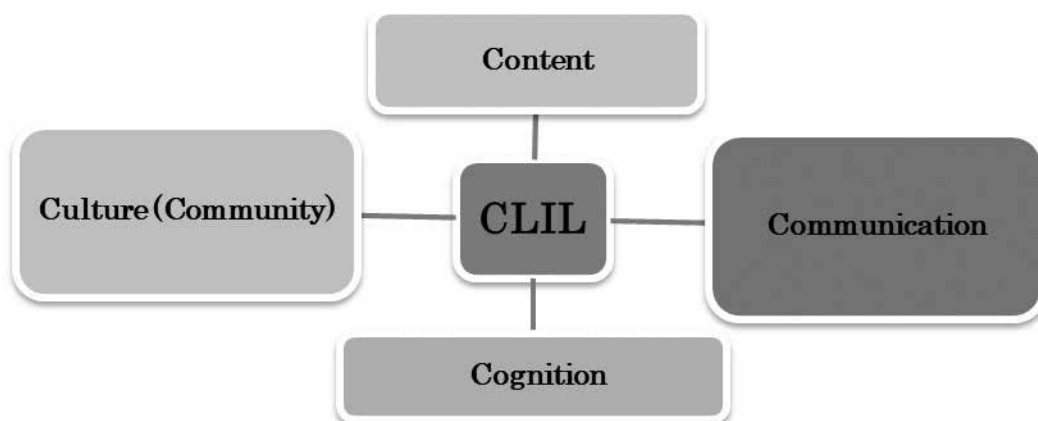


Figure 1. The four C's of CLIL

The four C's of CLIL are highlighted in figure 1 and are discussed below.

### Content

As the name suggests this refers to the content of the class whether it be a chemistry lesson or a course on intercultural communication. The teacher or the institution that the teacher works at may decide the content of the class, but the actual CLIL methodology is very flexible. There are no fixed methods nor does CLIL stipulate any. The only thing that is rigid is the dual focus on the teaching of content and language. Most ELT teachers will already be aware of the classroom techniques it employs and as Sasajima and Kavanagh (2017) state CLIL is like a patchwork quilt whereby you can use a variety of learning and teaching methods.

### Communication

The four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing are covered within CLIL. However it differs to the traditional classroom in that teacher-talking time is reduced significantly and the class is more student-centered which helps promote active learning, a current buzzword within English teaching in Japan. The teacher decides the kind of communication the students will be involved in and in what shape, for example, as in group work, pair work and presentations. In addition, the class syllabus should

have a focus on what kind of communication is required for the successful completion of the course and to what level the class is pitched at as students may have varying levels of proficiency in the language the class is taught in. This relates to the concept of scaffolding which stems from the intermediate stage of learning development that Vygotsky's (1978) describes as 'the zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). The metaphor describes how learners are helped to achieve things they are not ready to accomplish by themselves. Like real scaffolding the process is temporary and provides the platform from which learners can construct the next level of knowledge and understanding.

CLIL involves learning to use language appropriately whilst using language to learn effectively. There are three kinds of language states that need to be executed in order for learning to occur within the CLIL classroom. Coyle et al. (2010) talk of a language triptych that materials used within a CLIL class should be based on. They are:

1. **Language of learning:** This is the learning of key words and phrases to understand the content of the lesson.
2. **Language for learning:** This concerns the language students will need to execute classroom activities.
3. **Language through learning:** This allows room for

the unpredictable language learning which may occur as the course progresses.

### Culture (Community)

This helps students use what they have learned in class to help them relate to and understand the world around them. The class can help learners have a better understanding of intercultural communication and other cultures within the community or classroom environment that they are studying in.

### Cognition

In its basic terms, this refers to encouraging students to think by themselves and to ask questions, in short, to develop their critical thinking skills. This relates to Bloom's (1955) Taxonomy as low order thinking skills (LOTS). According to the theory students practicing LOTS learn to remember, understand and apply the new knowledge they have acquired by explaining it. Students are also encouraged to practice what Bloom (1955) calls Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) that consist of analyzing, evaluating and creating. Coyle et al (2010) suggest that an effective CLIL course challenges learners to think independently by themselves and to participate in these higher order thinking skills. They also propose that CLIL is not just about the transfer of knowledge but also about helping students to construct their own understanding and to be academically challenged within the CLIL classroom. From a theoretical perspective CLIL borrows from

some of the aspects of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory.

The benefits of CLIL can be seen to stem from the principles and practices of the 4 C's and are outlined in table 1 below.

### The Practice of CLIL in Japan

English language education in Japan is a compulsory subject that is studied for six years. The word 'study' is important here, as it is studied like an academic subject with an emphasis on grammatical knowledge, memorization of sentence patterns and directed towards success in examinations. This is in contrast to acquiring a language or using it for communicative purposes in order to enhance cognitive skills such as critical thinking. These are the characteristics that form the foundations of CLIL methodology.

In a time of globalization the emphasis now is to try and reform the rather conservative and traditional approach to language teaching that Japan has been administering for years. Since 2011, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) now requires all elementary schools to introduce compulsory English lessons for pupils in their fifth and sixth year. These classes (a total of 35 in the academic year) however will not be formally graded and the aim of this earlier introduction of English, they say, is to train children to communicate with others actively and encourage them to communicate with English speaking people

Table 1. The benefits of CLIL

Improves language competence and oral communication skills.	Increases learners' motivation and confidence in both the language and the subject.
Develops multilingual interests and attitudes.	Diversifies methods and forms of classroom practice.
Develops intercultural communication skills.	Provides opportunities to study content through different perspectives.
Builds intercultural knowledge and understanding.	Allows learners more contact with the target language.
Develops higher order thinking skills as well as lower order.	Complements other subjects rather than competes with them.

Adapted from Aspel (2012)

(Ikegashira et al. 2009). MEXT has further stated that English language education teaching objectives should aim to:

1. Develop an understanding of languages and cultures through varying experiences.
2. Promote a positive attitude towards communication and communicating.
3. Familiarize students with the initial basic sounds and expressions of the language.

In 2013 MEXT stipulated that at the upper end of Junior high school level, language activities should be conducted in English which essentially means that the teacher and students are only using English within the classroom. Yamano (2013) suggests that these new MEXT objectives as outlined above can tie in very neatly with the framework that seeks to articulate CLIL practices as defined by the 4 C's. In addition, Ikeda (2013b) writes that CLIL can play a role in positively influencing the current situation in Japan, as it has done in Europe, with respect to language learning, and education in general.

There now exists a group of scholars and educators within Japan who are promoting a discussion of CLIL as a successful language teaching approach that can cater for all areas and levels of education in Japan. J-CLIL is an academic association led by the respected Professor Shigeru Sasajima, who has published numerous books and articles on the subject matter. I have the privilege to work with him on workshops conducted here and in Tokyo and as the chair of the Tohoku J-CLIL chapter I am working towards organizing future seminars and conferences to share the experiences and knowledge of others who are working within the CLIL framework.

Ohmori (2014) writes that CLIL is still new to many teachers in Japan and Brown (2015) states that some Japanese university programs could be included under a broad definition of CLIL even though the

teachers themselves are unaware of CLIL as a teaching methodology. The majority of CLIL based courses in Japan could perhaps be divided into two groups, a language embedded approach and an adjunct CLIL framework based on the terminology created by Coyle et al (2010). The former group may focus more on language as reflected by the fact that these classes are conducted by language teachers, often foreign, who have a knowledge of the discipline or content that they are teaching. In this language embedded CLIL model Brown (2015) suggests that the teacher is sensitive to the language-learning needs of students and is able to give the students language-learning support. These CLIL classes are dual focused and have both language and content as course aims as illustrated in their syllabi. My own CLIL course, where Karate and Japanese culture is taught to a combined class of foreign exchange students and advanced Japanese learners of English, is a reflection of this. It has two course aims that aim to fulfill the learning desires of the two sets of students, specifically, to introduce foreign students to Japanese culture and Karate and to improve the English ability of the Japanese students through collaboration with foreign students in an international classroom setting (Kavanagh, 2018). These kinds of language embedded classes are also considered as a reflection of the soft or weak side side of CLIL that has an emphasis on both the language and content of the class.

The latter group, the adjunct CLIL model, can be defined as a hard version of CLIL whereby content is taught in the medium of a foreign language such as English, but the focus is not on language learning. Such CLIL classes that follow this model are usually done by non-language teachers and considered adjunct as students will need to have language preparation or support classes before or in tandem with this kind of CLIL course (Brown, 2015). For language teachers, the language embedded methodology is what we are involved in and it is this approach that forms the bulk

of CLIL teaching in Japan. Interestingly, it is in stark contrast to how CLIL is executed in Europe. Ohmori (2014) writes that in Japan “CLIL is adopted within English language education curricula, and not within the framework of teaching subjects. The instructors are basically language teachers and not content specialists like in European countries” (p.47).

In a bid to attract the best international students CLIL has been incorporated into courses at European universities. Coleman (2006) states three reasons for this. The first is that English is the lingua franca of academia; the second is that CLIL is seen as an innovative teaching methodology. The third is that education conducted through the medium of English is considered prestigious in that it can give numerous advantages for both job prospects and further educational opportunities.

In Japan the falling birthrate is resulting in a population of fewer students for universities to recruit from. This is leading many universities to open up enrollment opportunities for foreign students to study their major in Japan through the medium of English. Tohoku University’s Global Learning program is an example of this where students from IPLA (International Program of Liberal Arts) can take classes in English. As the classes are conducted in English enrolling into these courses does not require any form of Japanese language ability. For the majority of IPLA students, English is usually not the student’s first language but they all have a very high proficiency in it. It could be argued then, that in a broad sense, the Global learning center could be doing CLIL in its hard form although the classes are not packaged as such. In other words, these classes conducted in the medium of English focus on the subject content rather than the language of instruction. Brown (2015) mentions that Japanese government figures suggest that approximately a third of all university courses offer classes that may be considered CLIL. The popularity of CLIL he

suggests is that teachers and administrators understand the benefits of it and can adopt the approach based on its premise of an effective dual focus of language and content. The next section examines some of the literature which focuses on both teacher and student perspectives on CLIL classes and methodology.

### Student and teacher perspectives on CLIL at university level

Some studies have looked at the reasons behind why students elect to choose CLIL based classes over more traditional based courses. In the Turkish context, Bozdogan & Karlidag (2013) looked at the perspectives of students who take a chemistry class in Turkish as opposed to a class with the same content conducted in the medium of English, in other words, a CLIL class. Students who opted for the latter stated that the CLIL course seemed prestigious and that they felt they were part of something innovative. Students also outlined the benefits of the CLIL approach in respect to how it improves their English proficiency and opens up a new world of English based literature which would not have been accessible in a Turkish only class.

Brown (2015) conducted a similar study where he examined the choices made by Japanese students who were offered traditional skills based classes such as reading and writing verses a CLIL based course of study. The students within his study stated that they opted for the CLIL class based on intellectual curiosity about the content of the class, an understanding of the benefits of CLIL and the feeling of accomplishment that the CLIL class instills in students.

Yoshihara et al. (2015) found that from a sample of 194 university students who participated in CLIL classes, that all students were positively inclined towards learning English through CLIL and that it was an effective way for the students to learn the language through topics that motivated them.

MacGregor (2016) interviewed 13 teachers who worked at universities in Japan and who identified themselves as practitioners of CLIL. She examined the teacher's opinions concerning the CLIL methodology, their definitions of it and their understanding of its characteristics and class materials. The teachers were found to have positive attitudes towards CLIL, as outlined in their responses below. The teachers stated that:

1. CLIL is motivating for teachers.
2. CLIL motivates students to further develop their language skills.
3. CLIL is goal orientated and students feel they are doing something special in an academic context.
4. CLIL is a useful methodology for language teachers who can adapt lessons based on the needs and level of their students.

In terms of a CLIL definition MacGregor (2016) found that all of the teachers understood the dual focus of the approach on both language and content. In addition, they all had a grasp on the characteristics of CLIL classes, including the use of authentic materials, the use of scaffolding, and the emphasis on critical thinking and group collaboration. She found however, that most of these teachers were unaware of the core principles of CLIL, specifically, the 4 C's, Blooms taxonomy or the language triptych. This was also reflected in the response and reaction of some Tohoku University faculty members who attended a workshop conducted by Sasajima and Kavanagh (2017). This would lead me to assume that along with other CLIL commentators such as MacGregor (2016) and Ikeda (2013) that more workshops and seminars are needed to support and educate teachers of the benefits and practical applications of CLIL. This could lead to a greater understanding and institutional recognition of the approach which may see it enter the mainstream curriculum in Japan as it does in

Europe.

## Conclusions

Ikeda (2013a) writes that if CLIL is a toddler in Europe than it is a mere baby in Japan. This would suggest that CLIL is in its infancy. However, as outlined in this introductory paper, CLIL is a classroom methodology worth spreading and implementing further within the Japanese education system. It is a holistic approach that can deal with both content and language within one course and the weak or soft version of CLIL may be best suited for the educational setting in Japan especially at the junior and high school level.

The climate of a globalized society, reflected in universities in Japan offering courses in English, seems like a perfect match in which CLIL can flourish. There does however need to be a better understanding of the approach and how it can be implemented through teacher training, empirical research and faculty development workshops. As the Tohoku J-CLIL chapter chair this is something I will invest my time in.

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