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## Practice-Oriented Paper

# Student Perceptions and Teacher Concerns Regarding a CLIL Debate Course

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Research suggests that CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) courses can have a positive impact on student motivation and interest in addition to improving linguistic capabilities. However, when a CLIL English Debate course was introduced as a required course at a university in Tokyo, discussions among teachers raised questions about its appropriateness. The participation and motivation of students, the ability of lower proficiency students, and the appropriateness of materials were questioned. Surveys were designed to assess the students' perceptions of the course to evaluate whether their experiences matched the concerns of the teachers. Across all proficiency bands the quantitative data showed generally positive expectations at the beginning of the course and positive opinions at the end of the semester. This suggests that they did not share the concerns initially expressed by their instructors. Qualitative data was varied but generally positive. At first, students were nervous about their abilities but excited to improve their language and debate skills. By the end of the semester, they reported learning to think and communicate logically as well as how to focus on being understood. Responses provided insight into opportunities to improve the course design to better match their goals and expectations.

In 2020, a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) English Debate course was introduced as a required course for all first-year students at a university in Tokyo as part of a curriculum redesign. The Coronavirus pandemic forced the first iteration to be taught online and in the following year instruction began online before returning to campus. It was taught entirely face-to-face for the first time in the 2022 academic year.

Discussions among teachers assigned to teach the course revealed some

common concerns. Few considered themselves experts on debate which caused them to feel concerned about the quality of content instruction. Misgivings about the appropriateness of the linguistic content, particularly for lower proficiency learners, amplified this reservation. Uncertainty regarding student motivation, participation, and capability were discussed, and the semester started with several teachers holding the belief that the course was appropriate only for higher proficiency learners.

This paper considers existing research on CLIL and details the results of two student surveys as a means of reflecting on the concerns of the teachers in charge of the course. A review of existing research and a reflection on the researcher's own experiences in the course were used to create the following three research questions.

1. What were the students' expectations before beginning the course?
2. What were the students' perceptions at the end of the semester?
3. What did the students believe they learned?

The goal is to determine whether these students shared the concerns detailed above and to identify ways for potential improvements to the course to better meet student needs.

CLIL as a methodology is understood as teaching content and language simultaneously in one course (Coyle, et al., 2010; Ennis, 2015; Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021; Nitta & Yamamoto, 2020). Courses developed under this approach differ from traditional content or language classes in that learning objectives encompass both content knowledge and development of language skills, with the instructional method focusing on teaching and learning content in the target language (Coyle, et al., 2010; Nitta & Yamamoto, 2020), developing language skills necessary to communicate about the topic in a second or additional language (Coyle, et al., 2010; Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021). CLIL has been gaining in popularity in recent decades (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2014; Bakken & Brevik, 2022) with proponents asserting that the intention is to improve multilingual education and better meet student needs (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2014; Nitta & Yamamoto, 2020).

CLIL courses fall along a spectrum as the prioritization of content

and language varies (Nitta & Yamamoto, 2020) making evaluation of the methodology challenging (Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021). However, vocabulary gains have been observed with specific notes on receptive vocabulary (Agustín-Llach & Alonso, 2014), specialized vocabulary (Aguilar, 2012), and lower frequency vocabulary (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Other reported beneficial learning outcomes include improved listening proficiency and grammatical knowledge (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2014) and breadth of communication styles (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Conversely, Merino and Lasagabaster (2018) found benefits only from intensive CLIL courses and Pladevall-Ballester (2016) noted greater improvement in science classes as opposed to arts and craft and suggested that CLIL courses may be more effective for academic subjects. Additionally, receptive skills' increases tend to outpace those for productive skills (Yang & Gosling, 2014), though cooperative learning may reduce this discrepancy as pair and group work increases opportunities for language production (Vázquez, et al., 2015).

Student perceptions of CLIL are generally positive (e.g. Barrios, 2022; Cañado, 2018; Roiha & Sommier, 2018). Students reported being motivated and enjoying the tasks and group work (Zheng, et al., 2023). Learners also reported believing they had improved their language skills (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016) and feeling more able to express themselves in the target language (Roiha & Sommier, 2018). However, Barrios (2022) acknowledged that some learners did not enjoy CLIL courses and speculated that the intensity of the course and difficulty of the content may have caused some students to express dissatisfaction. Zheng, et al. (2023) noted that CLIL courses in cognitively challenging subjects were less popular, though they speculate that this may be due to these subjects being demotivating regardless of teaching method. Lasagabaster & Doiz (2016) reported that students did not like CLIL textbooks, instead preferring authentic materials. Learners also wanted more opportunities to practice the target language in class (Cañado, 2018; Yang & Gosling, 2014). Neither paper identified the reason behind this desire, and it may be due to the individual implementation in the programs studied or due to the inherent need for CLIL classes to serve two masters. CLIL instructors echoed students'

concerns about communicative opportunities (Szczesniak & Muñoz Luna, 2022) and they worried about a lower quality of content knowledge (Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021) and the need for first language use to solve comprehension issues (Kao, 2023, Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021; Yang & Gosling, 2014).

## **Method**

For this study two surveys, combining quantitative and qualitative questions, were distributed to six debate classes. Each class consisted of approximately 20 students. Likert scale data were analyzed by assigning values ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Participants represented all proficiency bands with level 1 as the most proficient and level 4 being the least proficient. The first survey was given following the course's first lesson to capture initial, pre-treatment expectations of the course and the second, post-treatment survey was given following the twelfth of 14 lessons and was intended to gather data regarding how the students perceived the course at the end of the semester and what they believed they had learned. The second survey was given following the twelfth lesson as opposed to the fourteenth to maximize the response rate since it was believed that fewer students would be willing to complete a survey after the final lesson when the course was officially over. Additionally, the final debates were split with one group performing in lesson 13 and another in lesson 14, so a survey given following the thirteenth lesson would have included responses from students with different experiences.

## **Results and Discussion**

In total, 86 students responded to the first survey and 72 responded to the second. The results of the first survey were analyzed and discussed to address the first research question regarding students' expectations prior to beginning the course, while the second survey was addressed in two parts to answer the second and third research question regarding students' perceptions of the course at the end of the semester and their opinions of their own learning respectively.

## Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to determine the expectations of the students at the start of the semester. The first survey asked about their experience with using English to learn content, their interest in the course and learning English in general, as well as their thoughts about how the course would go. The results below are not presented in the same sequence as the questions appeared on the survey. Overall, the results suggested a positive view of the course although nervousness regarding linguistic ability was common.

Table 1 shows students' reported experience with using English to learn content, showing that overall, more than half of participants reported having this experience.

A single-factor ANOVA found that the variation between proficiency bands was statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ .

As seen in the following three tables, interest in the class, methodology, and continued English study was generally high across all proficiency bands.

Proficiency was correlated with interest in the course (Table 2) and learning content using English (Table 3) at  $p \leq .05$ , but the relationship with further English study (Table 4) was not significant. Prior experience with learning content in English was correlated with all three, indicating this may be a better predictor than proficiency. However, as experience was correlated with proficiency, it is difficult to disentangle the two.

Table 1

Q1. Have You Ever Learned About a Non-English Topic by Using English Before?

| Proficiency band | Yes | No | Total | Percent yes |
|------------------|-----|----|-------|-------------|
| Level 1          | 13  | 1  | 14    | 92.86       |
| Level 2          | 18  | 12 | 30    | 60.00       |
| Level 3          | 13  | 13 | 26    | 50.00       |
| Level 4          | 6   | 10 | 16    | 37.50       |
| Total            | 50  | 36 | 86    | 58.14       |

Table 2

*Q2. I am Interested in Taking This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 5              | 8     | 1                          | 0        | 0                 | 14    | 4.29 |
| Level 2          | 6              | 13    | 9                          | 2        | 0                 | 30    | 3.77 |
| Level 3          | 2              | 11    | 11                         | 2        | 0                 | 26    | 3.50 |
| Level 4          | 4              | 5     | 7                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 3.81 |
| Total            | 17             | 37    | 28                         | 4        | 0                 | 86    | 3.78 |

Table 3

*Q5. I am Interested in Learning About a Non-English Topic With English Instruction*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 5              | 7     | 1                          | 1        | 0                 | 14    | 4.14 |
| Level 2          | 5              | 15    | 8                          | 2        | 0                 | 30    | 3.77 |
| Level 3          | 0              | 13    | 8                          | 5        | 0                 | 26    | 3.31 |
| Level 4          | 3              | 5     | 8                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 3.69 |
| Total            | 13             | 40    | 25                         | 8        | 0                 | 86    | 3.67 |

Qualitative responses were similarly positive. There were 82 responses to the question “In your own words, how do you feel about taking this course?” with only nine responses categorized as negative versus 47 positives. Of the negative responses, four additionally included positive commentary. Positive responses referenced both linguistic improvement and course content, as is illustrated in the following examples.

“I thought this course helps me a lot since I want to study abroad and use English for my work in the future.”

Table 4

*Q6. I Want to Study English More During My Time at This University*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 6              | 5     | 3                          | 0        | 0                 | 14    | 4.21 |
| Level 2          | 10             | 15    | 3                          | 1        | 1                 | 30    | 4.07 |
| Level 3          | 2              | 18    | 3                          | 3        | 0                 | 26    | 3.73 |
| Level 4          | 3              | 4     | 8                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 3.56 |
| Total            | 21             | 42    | 17                         | 5        | 1                 | 86    | 3.90 |

“I’m looking forward to it because I can practice developing critical thinking skills.”

Despite overall positive expectations, confidence was relatively neutral, and participants were somewhat nervous about the course. Table 5 shows the participants reported level of confidence and Table 6 shows their reported level of nervousness.

An open-ended question allowed participants to specify what they were nervous about prior to beginning the course and responses indicated that most concerns were about linguistic and communicative ability, with 52 of 82 responses classified this way. Hesitation about public speaking was a distant second with 14 responses. Only four responses were related to course content.

Two more open-ended questions asked what the participants expected and what they were looking forward to in the course and the responses revealed a mismatch between their expectations and interests. There were 65 responses indicating an expectation regarding linguistic improvement and 25 focused on debate skills (including 16 responses mentioning both), however comments regarding what students were looking forward to often mentioned the classroom experience. Only 25 mentioned language skill improvement and seven mentioned debate skill improvement, while 38 talked about the experience of the debate and 24 referenced working with classmates. The enthusiasm for the

Table 5

*Q3. I am Confident I Can Do Well in This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 1              | 2     | 6                          | 4        | 1                 | 14    | 2.86 |
| Level 2          | 1              | 6     | 17                         | 4        | 2                 | 30    | 3.00 |
| Level 3          | 1              | 7     | 9                          | 8        | 1                 | 26    | 2.96 |
| Level 4          | 1              | 4     | 5                          | 6        | 0                 | 16    | 3.00 |
| Total            | 4              | 19    | 37                         | 22       | 4                 | 86    | 2.97 |

Table 6

*Q4. I am Nervous About Taking This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 1              | 5     | 3                          | 5        | 0                 | 14    | 3.14 |
| Level 2          | 4              | 11    | 12                         | 3        | 0                 | 30    | 3.53 |
| Level 3          | 5              | 11    | 6                          | 4        | 0                 | 26    | 3.65 |
| Level 4          | 3              | 5     | 4                          | 4        | 0                 | 16    | 3.44 |
| Total            | 13             | 32    | 25                         | 16       | 0                 | 86    | 3.49 |

classroom experience aligns with the findings of Zheng, et al. (2023), who noted positive responses to activities.

In summary, the first survey revealed generally positive expectations across all proficiency bands with high levels of interest. Students primarily expected language skill improvements, though they were primarily looking forward to the classroom experience. They also reported concerns about their ability to participate due to linguistic and communicative abilities, which aligns with the concerns of instructors of the course.

## Research Question 2

The second survey asked students to report on their perceptions of the course at the end of the semester as well as to note what they thought they had learned. The second research question focused on their perceptions of the course which were overwhelmingly positive.

Three questions were asked to gauge the popularity of the course, the results of which are presented in Tables 7, 8, and 9.

Responses to all three questions were positive across all proficiency bands.

Table 7

### *Q1. I Enjoyed Taking This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 12             | 4     | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.75 |
| Level 2          | 8              | 5     | 4                          | 0        | 0                 | 17    | 4.24 |
| Level 3          | 11             | 8     | 3                          | 0        | 1                 | 23    | 4.22 |
| Level 4          | 4              | 11    | 1                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.19 |
| Total            | 35             | 28    | 8                          | 0        | 1                 | 72    | 4.33 |

Table 8

### *Q9. I Want to Take More Courses Where I Learn About a Topic Through English Instruction*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 7              | 7     | 1                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 4.25 |
| Level 2          | 2              | 7     | 6                          | 2        | 0                 | 17    | 3.53 |
| Level 3          | 4              | 5     | 7                          | 7        | 0                 | 23    | 3.26 |
| Level 4          | 2              | 7     | 6                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 3.63 |
| Total            | 15             | 26    | 20                         | 11       | 0                 | 72    | 3.63 |

Table 9

*Q10. I Want to Continue Studying English*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 11             | 5     | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.69 |
| Level 2          | 12             | 3     | 0                          | 2        | 0                 | 17    | 4.47 |
| Level 3          | 8              | 10    | 4                          | 1        | 0                 | 23    | 4.09 |
| Level 4          | 4              | 7     | 4                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 3.88 |
| Total            | 35             | 25    | 8                          | 4        | 0                 | 72    | 4.26 |

While a single-factor ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference across bands for interest in further CLIL courses and continued English study, the lowest proficiency band gave more positive responses regarding content through English instruction than the middle two bands, indicating proficiency may not be the reason for this difference but rather other variations between the classes may be the explanatory factor.

The qualitative data was also generally positive. Of 65 responses regarding participants' feelings towards learning debate with English instruction, 14 were clearly positive and the only negative comment expressed disappointment in a lack of opportunity to use debate skills out of the classroom. Additionally, when asked to report things they did not like, 41 of the 65 responses were some variation of "nothing."

When asked what they liked, responses matched the first survey with classroom experiences as the most prevalent response category. Of 65 responses, 21 mentioned classmates, 20 mentioned the teacher, and 19 referred to how the course was managed. Only 13 mentioned language skills and 11 mentioned content. Of the 24 replies for negative points that were not some variation of "nothing," two were about public speaking, four about classmates, five about difficulty, five about topic balance, one about the teacher's language difficulty, nine about administrative matters, and five about language. Of those five coded

as language, three were about difficulty and two noted they wished their group did not use Japanese for preparation. Administrative matters were varied but included things like scheduling and methods of creating groups.

Course difficulty did not seem to be an issue. Nearly all participants believed they did well with only a single reply disagreeing, and when asked if the course was too difficult the results were clustered around neutral with a slight lean towards disagreement, leaving no support for claiming the difficulty was inappropriate.

Qualitative data further supports the conclusion that the difficulty was appropriate. When asked which parts of the course were difficult, language and content were fairly evenly split and none of the replies could be marked as an egregious point of difficulty. Two examples are given here for illustration.

“In the actual debate, I had to accurately understand what the opposing team was saying and take some sort of reaction in a short amount of time.”

“Cross examination is hard for me because I have to guess the opponent’s opinion and think about questions and answers.”

Feedback regarding the textbook was also positive with no statistically significant variation across proficiency bands. Qualitatively, participants stated the book was useful for reference and easy to understand and the few negative responses just found it unnecessary. Qualitative data about the teacher was positive but generic and provided little insight.

Feedback regarding potential improvements to the course was varied. Individual or classmate improvement was the most common coding, followed by nothing, but comments requesting more chances for language practice and for increased opportunities to debate followed closely behind. This supports the findings of Cañado (2018) as well as of Yang & Gosling (2014) that participants in CLIL classes would prefer more opportunities for language use.

Overall, participants reported satisfaction with the course with very few negative responses or comments. There were minor points identified for adjustment related to classroom management and administrative issues, but the only negative comments that could be related to the CLIL approach were requests for more opportunities for practice.

### Research Question 3

The third research question also draws on the responses from the second survey and focuses on what the participants believed they had learned over the course of the semester. Tables 10 and 11 show how much participants believed they improved their English skills and teamwork skills respectively and Tables 12 and 13 show how much they believed they learned about debate and about the topics they debated in class.

The responses indicated that the participants believed they improved in every area targeted by the survey. They reported improving their English proficiency,

Table 10

#### *Q5. I Improved My English Skills by Taking This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 3              | 9     | 3                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 3.88 |
| Level 2          | 3              | 9     | 5                          | 0        | 0                 | 17    | 3.88 |
| Level 3          | 6              | 10    | 6                          | 1        | 0                 | 23    | 3.91 |
| Level 4          | 5              | 11    | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.31 |
| Total            | 17             | 39    | 14                         | 2        | 0                 | 72    | 3.99 |

Table 11

#### *Q8. I Improved at Working With a Team From This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 5              | 10    | 1                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.25 |
| Level 2          | 6              | 10    | 1                          | 0        | 0                 | 17    | 4.29 |
| Level 3          | 12             | 7     | 3                          | 0        | 1                 | 23    | 4.26 |
| Level 4          | 8              | 7     | 0                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 4.38 |
| Total            | 31             | 34    | 5                          | 1        | 1                 | 72    | 4.29 |

Table 12

*Q4. I Learned a Lot About How to Have a Debate From This Course*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 11             | 5     | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.69 |
| Level 2          | 9              | 8     | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 17    | 4.53 |
| Level 3          | 11             | 9     | 3                          | 0        | 0                 | 23    | 4.35 |
| Level 4          | 7              | 9     | 0                          | 0        | 0                 | 16    | 4.44 |
| Total            | 38             | 31    | 3                          | 0        | 0                 | 72    | 4.49 |

Table 13

*Q6. I Learned a Lot About the Topics We Debated in Class*

| Proficiency band | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total | Mean |
|------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|------|
| Level 1          | 7              | 8     | 0                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 4.31 |
| Level 2          | 5              | 9     | 2                          | 1        | 0                 | 17    | 4.06 |
| Level 3          | 9              | 8     | 6                          | 0        | 0                 | 23    | 4.13 |
| Level 4          | 7              | 6     | 2                          | 1        | 0                 | 16    | 4.19 |
| Total            | 28             | 31    | 10                         | 3        | 0                 | 72    | 4.17 |

improving teamwork skills, learning how to have a debate, and learning about the topics discussed in their debates. There was no statistically significant variation between the proficiency bands. These responses indicate that, from the students' perspective, the course effectively meets the goals set forth by Nitta & Yamamoto (2020) in their explanation of the new curriculum.

When asked which linguistic skills they believe improved, speaking was the clear leader, selected in 60 of 72 responses, followed by listening with 41. Writing was selected more than reading. These results diverge from previous research that

emphasized vocabulary acquisition (Aguilar, 2012; Agustín-Llach & Alonso, 2014; Dalton-Puffer, 2011) and receptive skills (Yang & Gosling, 2014). Debate requiring the learners to write and give speeches in class may be the cause of this difference and the emphasis on group activities may lend support to Vázquez, et al.'s, (2015) view that cooperative learning may reduce the focus on receptive skills often observed in CLIL.

When asked the open-ended question “What did you learn about debate from this course?” 46 of the 64 responses focused on content skills including parts of a debate, critical thinking skills, research skills, teamwork, and crafting persuasive arguments. Only 27 mentioned communication or linguistic skill improvement. Two specific themes that were commonly mentioned were improvement of argumentation skills and clarity of communication with 16 and 14 mentions respectively.

The results related to learning and skill acquisition were again positive, with content knowledge outpacing language skill improvement in the responses. This indicates that the concerns about the quality of content instruction expressed by the instructors in charge of the course and as seen in prior research were not supported by the data.

## **Conclusion**

This paper used data from pre- and post-treatment surveys to assess the perceptions of university students in a required English CLIL debate course and to determine if they shared the concerns expressed by instructors of the course. The pre-treatment survey showed enthusiasm for the course and the CLIL approach and the post-treatment survey revealed that those positive attitudes persisted. Participants reported believing that they had improved their skills and knowledge in all areas targeted by the survey and that the activities and content were popular. As previous research suggested, there was an opportunity for improvement by increasing opportunities for communicative practice. Given the overall popularity of the course and reported benefits, small changes in lesson design targeted at communicative practice may further improve student perceptions and allow the course to do a better job meeting the CLIL goals of

improving linguistic proficiency while providing content knowledge in the target language.

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## Author bio

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