
Feature Article

Trains Leaving Stations: A Language Teacher Gets on Board with CLIL

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Universities in Japan and elsewhere are increasing the number of CLIL or content-based classes which focus on academic subjects rather than or in addition to language skills, and teachers who may only be formally trained and experienced in foreign language education are being asked to teach authentic content. In the words of a well-known expert in CLIL at a 2012 workshop, “This train is leaving the station. Are you getting on board?” This paper, based on my presentation at the 2016 CUE Conference, answers that question in the affirmative, drawing upon my own professional narrative in order to explore ways in which language teachers can use their training to teach a variety of subjects. I argue that language teachers possess a unique and valuable skill set, including cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, flexibility, and the ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of students. Instructors who have cultivated these skills, and are willing to engage in ongoing reflective practice and professional development, are able to teach content even in subjects for which they have no formal academic background and in situations which do not involve cooperation with content-area teachers.

Asking language teachers to teach academic subjects for which they are not qualified is problematic, to say the least. That said, CBLT (Content-based Language Teaching), CLIL (Content and Language-Integrated Learning), and EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) are all increasing in Japanese higher education. As a result, language teachers have been forced to develop new skills and even adjust their concept of identity as educators. The purpose of this paper is to explain my own process of professional development due to this shift in the profession, and why I have come to believe that those of us trained in TESOL or other language-teaching fields are uniquely suited to teach academic content even in subjects for which we are not academically qualified. I argue that trained

language-teaching professionals possess a unique and valuable skill set, including cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, flexibility, and the ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of students. Based on my experience, I make several practical recommendations for language teachers who wish to (or are required to) begin using CLIL or other content-based approaches in their classes.

By way of clarification, the “hard” version of CLIL requires the teacher to be either qualified in both language teaching and the subject being taught, or to have ongoing cooperation with content-area faculty. Unfortunately, although it is a worthwhile goal which teachers and our employers should work towards in the future, that sort of cooperation and dual qualification are difficult to achieve in Japan at present, due to institutional and other factors beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, what I and others in similar professional situations are actually doing in the classroom can more accurately be referred to as a “soft” or “light” CLIL approach, which meets the needs of Japanese university students, and is certainly within the training and experience of a qualified language teacher. Not only have the students expressed a high level of motivation and overall satisfaction with these courses, but teaching authentic content has proven to be an opportunity to grow personally and professionally. Embracing the CLIL trend, rather than resisting it, has broadened my horizons and taken my career in exciting new directions.

Guidelines and Observations

What follows is a list of several suggestions which language teachers may find helpful when teaching a CLIL or other content-based class in a subject for which they are not formally trained.

Teach subjects you find interesting. An important factor in the success of most of the courses I have taught is a strong personal interest in the topic, coupled with a willingness to learn more about the subject on my own. Having taken a few courses as an undergraduate, or having read several recent books on the subject, is beneficial but in my experience not completely necessary.

Honesty is the best policy. The instructor should be honest with students about his or her background. It is both unethical and unnecessary to pretend to be

something one is not. Honest communication with the students, and confidence in one's training and teaching experience, should not be underestimated.

Meet them where they are. It is useful to begin the course by assessing the students' skills and prior knowledge. Many subjects, such as psychology and cultural studies, can be applied to a variety of academic fields and future careers. If a student happens to be majoring in the subject and knows something the teacher does not, the teacher can embrace the presence of a resident expert rather than feeling threatened. Encouraging that student to contribute actively and share knowledge of the subject becomes an exciting cooperative learning experience.

Flexibility is the key. Rigidly following the syllabus is detrimental, if not impossible, especially if the class consists of students with different majors and a broad range of skill levels and interests. Even if the result is a decision to change the syllabus mid-term, meeting students' needs comes before any predetermined schedule.

Do not lose focus. A potential problem that can arise is becoming overwhelmed with background reading. While it is fascinating to be able to learn more about an interesting new subject, it is also important not to lose focus, which at all times should be meeting the needs of the students. A language-teaching background means that the teacher already has the skill to assess those needs, choose appropriate materials, and design a variety of activities.

Do not neglect language skills. After all, language skills are most likely the main reason the majority of students registered for the class! In particular, consider the importance of vocabulary building. Informal feedback from students (which will hopefully be quantified in future research) indicates that most students consider vocabulary to be the area in which they need the most practice, since they view it as affecting development of all other skills. Teachers are advised to take this into consideration and assess the needs of their own students during lesson planning and material development. Authentic texts provide a wealth of relevant vocabulary, in addition to examples of real discourse and grammar in use, which students can practice and apply later in a variety of learning situations.

Basic Course Design

In the CLIL or content-based classes I have taught, which include Psychology, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Environmental Problems, and Literature, most of the students have had little prior knowledge or interest in the course content. Indeed, few have even read the syllabus before the first day of class! However, as mentioned in the previous section, almost all of them have expressed a desire to maintain or develop their English language skill. CLIL is ideal for this purpose. Indeed, its very name states unequivocally that language is to be integrated with content.

The basic elements of most syllabuses I have written for content-based classes are as follows. If I am given a general subject upon which to plan a course, I first narrow the focus so that the students and I will not be overwhelmed in the 15 weeks of a typical semester at a Japanese university. Then I select short readings, usually from introductory textbooks designed for native speakers. Newspapers and properly-referenced, reliable websites such as those of the World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/en/>) and the American Psychological Association Topics page (<http://www.apa.org/topics/>) are also valuable. These are used as classroom texts through discussions, scaffolding of vocabulary, and other activities introducing basic concepts. Periodic surprise quizzes confirm whether everyone has been attending class, doing the readings, and paying attention. Class discussions are expanded and synthesized in regular written homework, usually essays, reaction papers, or short research reports. Homework, by the way, is corrected. The issue of when and how to correct students' written work is quite divisive among language teachers and beyond the scope of this paper, but I fall into the pro-correction camp. Revising their written homework is optional; students can pass the course if they complete all assignments. However, revising and resubmitting essays is required in order to earn an A in the class, and most students make an effort to do so.

The main assessment, amounting to 25-30% of the final grade, is an interactive presentation, which is more accurately called a "mini-lesson". Depending on class size, this is done individually or in small groups, usually with a maximum of four members. Students select a topic related to the course subject, and actually

teach a 20-30 minute lesson about it to their classmates. It is made clear from the beginning that it is not a one-sided presentation or lecture, it must include some kind of active audience participation, such as a discussion, role play, quiz, game, audio-visuals, or anything that assists in making the topic understandable and interesting for the class. The grade for the presentation is a combination of my evaluation, score/comment sheets from the audience members, and a self-assessment from the presenters.

Reflections and Revelations

In September 2012, I first heard the term CLIL at a professional development workshop offered at Sophia University, my current full-time employer. The speaker was Peeter Mehisto, a recognized authority on CLIL, and he made a statement about CLIL which made a huge impression on me and inspired the title of this paper. He said, “The train is leaving the station. Are you going to get on board?” He was referring to the necessity of language teachers continuing their professional development by integrating authentic content and real-world skills into their classes. Those refusing to change with the times would, indeed, be left behind. Surely enough, Sophia announced that fall that a new CLIL curriculum was being planned, and they offered and continue to offer many professional development sessions, including other well-known names in the field, to help the faculty become familiar with CLIL methodology and adjust to the ongoing curriculum changes.

There was more than a little resistance from some of my fellow instructors at the time. I understood, and still agree with some of their concerns. However, curriculum decisions had already been made, and I realized that my teaching had already been heading in a content-based direction for some time. Therefore, it made more sense to see this as an opportunity. As an increasing number of institutions of higher education are boarding this particular train, I would recommend that my colleagues do the same. I read as much as possible about CLIL and the subjects I wanted to teach, attended conferences and professional development meetings as often as I could, and came up with more ideas than I will ever be able to teach in the remaining years of my career.

A real turning point came with a unit of engineering and design in a mixed class of first and second-year engineering and science majors. This topic was far from my experience, but this class proved that I had no cause to be anxious about my lack of an engineering background. The students demonstrated that they did know their subject, and reminded me that my role was to guide them to use that knowledge in English, as they developed communication and critical thinking skills that would prove useful to them in any language. Their final presentations included everything from a comparison of the structural designs of famous local landmarks Tokyo Tower and Sky Tree, to an explanation of how engineering is used to create special effects in science-fiction films. Some groups designed and performed their own experiments, others did field work at a local science museum, and one student even introduced us all to a new presentation software, which is used much more widely now but neither I nor the other students had seen at the time. These were, without question, some of the best student presentations I have seen in my career, mostly due to the high level of enthusiasm and engagement from both the presenters and from the audience, their classmates.

Indeed, none of the above should be new information to language teachers who have been in the trenches. We already know that “learners must be taught in a way that helps them to use language in order to acquire subject knowledge” (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015, p. 15). We are familiar with various ways to scaffold material, make texts accessible, and help students to practice and develop their language and thinking skills. We are also comfortable with an active, student-centered approach which encourages communication at all levels. Through authentic content and activating students’ background knowledge, teachers can encourage students to go beyond developing English language skills, which no one can deny are useful in today’s globalized world; we can help them move toward higher-level thinking processes and provide opportunities for them to engage with material that actually relates to their future studies and their careers after graduation. Thus, if a teacher is trained in language pedagogy, he or she can teach a CLIL course. The key is remaining aware of the relationship between a subject and the language used to understand it. As Coyle, Hood, and

Marsh (2010) asserted, “no matter whether issues concerning the content or the language are dominant at a given point, neither must be subsumed or the interrelationship between them ignored” (p. 28).

Conclusion

As the current CLIL and content-based trend is likely to continue, language teachers will have to be able to make use of it as an opportunity to meet students’ needs as we ourselves grow professionally, using and building upon the valuable skills we already have. While extra work and a shift in our perceptions may be needed in these early years, it has been my experience that meaningful, authentic content not only benefits students and results in increased engagement and improved learning outcomes, but can help us to become better teachers with a wider repertoire of techniques and activities and a broader understanding of our role in the classroom. This is what we call in my native United States a win-win situation. In the long run, it is my belief that CLIL (and its relatives, CBLT and EMI) is a vehicle which can help bring Japanese tertiary education into the globalized world of the 21st century. It is a train which I am happy to be aboard.

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