

Some First-Aid Thoughts for Teachers to Make CLIL Work

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Abstract

In the past decade, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has gradually become acknowledged and internationally renowned as an effective education approach for learning languages and learning in general. Even though it has become common practice in many countries, it is still a rather new and innovative approach in Japan. Particularly in recent years, not only secondary schools and universities but also many private language schools have shown interest in this method and gradually integrated it into their curricula. Some top-tier universities have been implementing this method with successful results (Watanabe, Ikeda & Izumi, 2011). Some places may implement CLIL for political reasons rather than educational ones; however, no matter the reason or it was initiated, the teachers are crucial assets in making CLIL work. Support from the government and the school are certainly important, and cooperation from the students is necessary, but the most essential and urgent task to make CLIL work is to prepare teachers and help them to build a positive mindset toward CLIL and their teachings.

Keywords

CLIL, Content Teachers, EFL Teachers, Teachers' collaboration, Teacher training

Introduction

Good education is what we all seek. Teachers and researchers have tried many different kinds of teaching methods throughout history. Since it depends on learning situations and purposes, I am not saying that CLIL is the best method; but it is a good education approach that is worth trying. It is also a way of learning about education itself and the process of deep learning. Especially when we consider the actual English learning environment in Japan, CLIL seems to be more realistic and practical than other teaching approaches. Fluent use of English is a key to success in internationalization and opens doors to opportunities. With the Olympics drawing closer, and the needs for rapid globalization, the Japanese government is getting more and more serious about English Education. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the government established a working

group to support its campaign for 30,000 foreign students, which was launched in 2008. It is planned to increase the number of foreign students by 2020 and this is influencing a lot of universities to revise their policies and curricula in order to provide a wider range of courses and degree programs in English. This is not only going to open the door to more international students, it is also a good incentive to improve Japanese students' English ability and remedy their lack of motivation. Personally, I think it is a great opportunity to create an international learning environment within the universities and inspire more Japanese students to learn English. Already, some big changes are afoot and many new challenges need to be faced. As the trend toward using English as the medium of instruction for learning academic subjects is gathering momentum, the pressure on teachers, students and schools is increasing.

There are surely many issues we need to consider and prepare for, but I would like to focus on the teachers' role in this paper, as teachers are an essential element that needs to be attended to urgently in order to make CLIL work. First, I would like to mention four current issues that teachers are facing when implementing CLIL. Second, I would like to discuss some possible solutions and ideas to make those issues manageable. Last but not least, I would like to provide some first-aid tips for teachers to manage their stress, as teachers need to have a clear, motivated and positive mindset in order to face the new challenges in their teaching career.

Current Issues teachers are facing CLIL

I have been attending CLIL-related seminars, conferences and workshops in different countries. Each school may have different policies to follow and different instructions for teachers, but the problems and difficulties most teachers face are quite similar. Many European and Asian teachers I have met shared some common worries, such as students' English levels, the selection of materials, their own English proficiency and the quality of their lessons. However, the most frequently heard worry was "How do we apply CLIL?" Therefore, I would like to point out four main issues that we need to take into consideration urgently.

First and foremost, as Deller and Price (2007) mentioned, many Content teachers (here I refer to teachers who teach specialized subjects besides English itself) suddenly feel confused to find themselves in the position of having to teach their subjects in English, especially, where there is no particular support or training provided before or during the implementation of CLIL. It is a fact that many teachers are told to teach their subjects in English on demand at rather short notice. We all know the reasons and benefits for the schools and the students; however, without proper training and sufficient information, implementing CLIL would probably be like going through a maze for most teachers. On the other hand, for EFL teachers, implementing CLIL is becoming a different kind of challenge. Teachers of English who now have to teach another subject through English, rather than just the language itself, are searching for their "special" content. They certainly have the advantage of being able to communicate in the classroom with more confidence than the Content teachers; however, it is not easy to find the

resources. CLIL classes have a dual purpose; one is the learning of language and the other is the learning of content. Most Content teachers haven't received training in language teaching and most EFL teachers may not have up-to-date information regarding their previous field of study. In my case, since I have some business working background, that helps me to expand the lesson to a more content-based level, but there are still limits. Teachers need some support; otherwise it is not easy for them to plan and deliver their lessons properly in English. This not only applies, of course, to CLIL; it is always helpful to have extensive trainings in order to reflect and improve on one's performance.

Second, students' lack of English proficiency could influence the progress and the quality of the content in the class. Having mixed-level students in the same class is really difficult, and that is no exception for EFL teachers. For instance, in my usual language classes, students are usually placed and divided by their English levels based on their TOEIC test results. However, in my Business English class, which is an elective course in the curriculum, students are usually from different departments with different English levels and it is not easy to choose materials from just one resource. So I usually need to combine different materials and prepare different ways to explain, in the hope that all the students in the class will be able to keep up. Although CLIL in higher education may focus more on content than language learning, it is still necessary to figure out how to deliver the content for better understanding without simplifying or omitting too much of it. We all need to be aware that some concepts are not easy to understand even if the students are learning in their mother tongue.

Third, teachers' competence in English could be a major urgent issue to be tackled. Not all Content teachers are comfortable with using English, and some may not feel confident enough to teach and explain their subjects in the language. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), many schools just ask their teachers to conduct lessons in English without providing proper training or support or considering their teachers' actual English ability. In addition, Takala (2002) discussed the importance of the foreign language ability for teachers' teaching CLIL classes and the evaluation methods for measuring their foreign language capability are also emphasized. It is important to make learning visible, and better understanding depends on how teachers explain and deliver the lessons.

Fourth, most teachers are already overloaded and preoccupied with their own subject preparation, so it would be quite a time-consuming task for them to consider what English words to choose, what materials to use and how to deliver the classes in English. Content teachers basically deliver knowledge of the particular subject they are teaching or set up discussion with the students; thus when it comes to using English to do all those activities, it would be a totally different level to think about.

Four possible solution to try immediately

Now, let's think about how to solve those problems. I don't have three easy steps for what teachers

using CLIL need to do; however, I would like to suggest some potential ideas that teachers could work on immediately.

First of all, teachers should ask the school or search for some outside support to see if it is possible to get regular assistance with CLIL teaching. Both the school and the person in charge of the CLIL program need to realize that a solid teacher support system and regular training are urgently needed. The authorities are busy making more policies to reach globalization and schools are busy making more courses to be provided in English and getting more international students; however, necessary support and training for teachers is missing. Some schools may have provided a few introductory workshops or training courses for their teachers, but that is not enough. Teachers who teach CLIL classes need more regular training, a more solid support system and the opportunity to observe and get feedback in order to make the method work in their classes.

Second, it is important to have Content teachers and EFL teachers working together as a team because we need to make the links between content and language learning clear and manageable. If the time for CLIL is limited, it is crucial to have this team work. In the same way that we usually pair or group our students in classes, it would work better and more easily to face the new challenge of CLIL if we partnered with other teachers for a team based-teaching structure. Certainly teachers need to be willing to be part of the team but I am sure there will be a lot of teachers who appreciate this opportunity to work with other colleagues and share ideas on each other's work. Personally, I think teaching is a lonely job. We don't talk much about our teaching with our colleagues apart from some school- or student-related decisions that needed to be made. It would be a great opportunity to work together, to have someone to talk to, and to share. I have been talking to different teachers and one common difficulty we have is that we usually have no one to turn to, and most of the time we have to figure out things by ourselves without any support. Therefore, if we had a support system to team up the teachers, we would also give teachers more time to develop new teaching strategies and to better themselves. Alternatively, it would also be great to have Content teachers' lessons and EFL teachers' lessons timetabled to follow one another. In this way, students would be able to receive support from the EFL teachers before or after their content lessons. This team work would also help both Content teachers and EFL teachers to work and share responsibilities together.

That also brings us to the third point, which is that using EFL teachers more effectively could be an important key to making CLIL work. As the language level of teachers could be a major issue when implementing CLIL, EFL teachers could help Content teachers to improve their English levels by giving regular language sessions, observing and giving feedback on lessons from not only the language but also methodology perspectives. EFL teachers could also help with some vocabulary explanation related to the subjects and provide some language teaching tips on how to refresh Content teachers' teaching skills. As I mentioned earlier, most Content teachers haven't received any language teaching training

before and it would be really helpful for them to learn some techniques that they can use immediately in their classes. Moreover, language teachers would be able to help Content teachers to make some supplemental materials to facilitate the comprehension of the lesson content. Some may ask at what level of English the teachers need to be able to teach in English, which is not an easy question to answer. Content teachers do not need to be as proficient in English as EFL teachers but at least they need to understand the questions of the students and also- make themselves understood. The school can also support Content teachers by providing extra English lessons, in just the same way that they provide extra after-school lessons for the students, although the style and arrangements could be a little different.

The last point would be something the school administration could consider before the start of the new school year, which is to reduce the number of students in each class. In most Japanese classes, there are usually 30 to 40 students, and even more for some common subjects that all students need to study in the lecture room. I understand that it might not be possible for some core and compulsory subjects but if time and space allows, small classes would make a big difference for both teachers and students. CLIL is all about deep learning and also learning itself. It is useful for teachers to be able to monitor and observe the class during the learning process and it would be helpful for them to prepare for the next lesson and help students to understand better.

Some tips for stress management

Teachers' well-being is the key to fostering a positive learning environment for students. It is important for teachers to have a positive mindset for their teaching and for themselves. However, teachers are not robots; they need to prepare themselves to meet the constant demands at work. As Roeser, Skinner, Beers and Jennings (2012) also described, teaching is uncertain, emotional and demanding; indeed, teachers have many roles to fulfill and they need more care than is recognized. If teachers are emotionally exhausted and feeling burnt-out from teaching, the CLIL challenge would seem to be more overwhelming, especially when there are students with different levels of maturity, academic ability and now also English levels which need to be considered. Therefore, it is important we teachers take care of ourselves first in order to be mindful and have more positive thoughts when using CLIL.

I would like to share some tips here that I learned from a well-being seminar for teachers in Florence two years ago:

- 1) Stay calm by practising meditation. When we hear the word "meditation", most of us immediately have their image of crossing our legs and sitting in a quiet room. But there are many different types of meditation and actually we can do it wherever and whenever we want to. Just briefly close your eyes, sit or even stand somewhere in a corner and consciously clear your mind. Try to relax every part of your body and breathe deeply, counting. "One, two, three, four, five", before starting your

day or before going to the classroom.

- 2) Think positively. When we are facing difficulties, it is not easy for us to think things in a positive way; however, just giving ourselves some time to relax, go out for a walk, or listen to our favorite music, will help the relaxing process. Some brain exercise we can easily find on the internet will help us to relax and activate our brains in a positive way. If we think of this new CLIL challenge more positively, we can see a light at the end of the tunnel. There is always a light at the end of the tunnel. For Content teachers, being able to teach their subjects in English will give them a new perspective. Sometimes when we teach the same thing for many years, we get used to it and forget the passion we felt at the beginning of our teaching. For Language teachers, it could be an opportunity to explore something new to teach through English and make the language alive.
- 3) Learn something new. It is important that we continue to grow both in our profession and personally. Besides attending workshops and reading books related to teaching, it would be good to take up some new things, such as a new language, a new musical instrument or an art class. When we learn something new, we will be able to understand better what may be going through the students' minds and what is difficult for them by experiencing similar situations.
- 4) Keep a balance between work and personal life. If possible, except perhaps during the exam period, try not to take things home. Whenever I take students' reports home, I grade and check, one hour passes, two hours passes, and I still have a lot to do. In addition, we still have lessons to prepare, and materials to study before the next class. It seems to be an endless cycle. It is crucial that teachers have some time out in order to be ready for new challenges.
- 5) Embrace stress and know that it is okay to be imperfect. Recognizing our stress is good for us to move on. Knowing it is okay not to be perfect is a relief for us to rest and make some time for ourselves.

Conclusion

How to make CLIL work? What are the factors most likely to bring success? We cannot just snap our fingers and make it happen. It is going to take time, but will be better once teachers are prepared and ready for the challenges. We need to have and share the faith that we will be able to make it happen. Language is a communicative and learning tool, so making CLIL work will not only help the students or the school and the country's policy, but also will help teachers to refresh their teaching styles and have new perspectives to look at things differently. In order to make CLIL work, it would be helpful and useful to have the opportunity to observe how other countries or schools are implementing this method and explore a deeper comprehension in order to use it in Japan appropriately and effectively. Every problem needs to have a solution. Some of the issues that I mentioned earlier are not really problems that we have to solve but rather paradoxes that we need to manage. Helping teachers to make CLIL work will be beneficial for the school, the students and teachers themselves to manage stress and enjoy teaching again, instead of being overwhelmed.

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