Reacting to the past: a CLIL pedagogy

Maintaining relevance and inspiring students to learn are ongoing struggles for educators anywhere. In our increasingly globalized, internationalized, and technologically advanced educational contexts, teachers are faced now more than ever with the task of getting students to not only pay attention in the classroom, but to engage, think critically, lead, problem-solve, and otherwise become more developed individuals.

Communicative learning has been an important development in language education in Japan, but now we need to do something with this communicative atmosphere students have come to expect. Language education in particular can benefit immensely as students communicate more through an increasing focus on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The pedagogy is called Reacting to the Past (RTTP) and it is now in use in all sections of our public speaking course in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University.

RTTP is an educational approach that uses content to get students to engage in debates and research and to prepare papers and speeches, in a way that allows students to develop skills in critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork. These skills match up with the three core skills (called shakaijin kisoryoku in Japanese) for working adults promoted by the Ministry of Economy, Trade & Industry (METI). The idea is that these skills are what the world is looking for from university graduates. The skills are:

- **Action**: the ability to move forward and stay engaged, to get up when you fall down. This includes taking initiative, motivating others, and achieving goals.
- **Thinking**: the ability to question and think problems through. This includes identifying problems, planning, and creative thinking.
- **Teamwork**: the ability to work with other people in pursuit of a common goal. This includes communication, listening, flexibility, awareness, cooperation, and stress control (Reed, 2010).

RTTP was developed by academics looking to improve these skills at Barnard College, Columbia University in New York, and quickly spread to more than 300 colleges and universities. Students participate in roles with detailed character descriptions based on real historical figures. Through the game format, they give speeches and participate in debates based on actual historical events. It is an opportunity for students to be at the
center of the action, have fun, and potentially rewrite history! In an EFL context, this pedagogy is essentially a CLIL approach that language teachers can use to shift a focus to content.

In this article, I share my experience using this pedagogy, as well as the experience of Darla Cornett, a budding educator and research assistant on the education innovation grant project. We both share the same enthusiasm and encourage like-minded language teachers to take advantage of RTTP in their classes.

**Darla**

My career as an educator is still in its infancy, but I have been fortunate enough to have already witnessed what I can confidently say will be some of the most memorable moments of my teaching career. I watched a grieving widow mercilessly berate one of her late husband’s detractors, heard the sorrowful yet power-laced last poem written by the victim of a villainous assassination plot, and witnessed the development of an intricate revenge plot aimed at restoring the honor a group of dedicated men felt their fallen master deserved. And all of this action took place inside the classroom. It was all the result of the new pedagogy—RTTP—in which students have competing goals and outcomes that they want to see occur, adding an element of competition to the learning that can pique the interest of even those less academically inclined.

RTTP was initially developed as a method to teach history. How then, does this pedagogy apply to language teachers? One of the greatest assets of RTTP is its adaptability. At Sophia University RTTP is used in both history and language courses. All RTTP games can be adapted to teachers’ own class goals. For instance, each game comes with a set of required readings for all students so that everyone will be on an equal playing field. However, the focus of the class remains up to the teacher. The textbook for The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C. could be as easily adapted for a political science course about the different types of governments as it could be for a language course emphasizing speechmaking and the ability to construct a strong argument.

An additional benefit for language instructors is that all RTTP games combine elements of research, writing, and speaking. In the class in which I used RTTP, students were required to give a speech in class on a pre-assigned topic; the points made in their speech had to be supported by sources, and the culmination of the class was a paper that incorporated all the previously completed work. While students normally dread writing a paper, especially if that paper is not in their native language, these students were enthusiastic about the chance to discuss the issues they confronted during the class in their final papers and most had no trouble settling on a paper topic based on the RTTP experience (in some cases, if a student had not been able to meet pre-assigned objectives, there was a special interest in continuing the argument in writing).

The class that used RTTP featured a mixture of about one-third native and two-thirds non-native English speakers. Before we began the RTTP portion of the course, the most frequently asked question from the non-native students concerned their ability to participate fully due to their self-perceived lack of English skills. As all of the students have goals they are supposed to try to achieve, they were made to work together and
adapt their communication techniques to accomplish their objectives. This served as a valuable lesson for the less confident non-native students as they learned that they could, indeed, work well with native speakers to achieve a goal. It was also an introduction to the reality of globalization for the native speakers; they learned that there are many varieties of English that exist in the world, each as valid as their own, and that they needed to learn to adjust their own language abilities if they wanted to communicate effectively. In the end, all of the students were communicating with each other without fear or hesitation.

Jim

The public speaking course in my faculty was coming under fire and considered for deletion from our curriculum as it was regarded as irrelevant and lacking academic integrity and practical value. The traditional course required students to prepare and deliver extemporaneous speeches of various genres, which is a skill that certainly holds great value to us as classroom teachers, but for our students, beyond the opportunity of facing any existing stage fright issues, the course was mostly just boring. Students reviewed the same old skills-focused course content like outlines, thesis statements, and reference lists, which didn’t go astray, but hardly inspired the students. They spent most of the course time listening to their classmates’ speeches and making trivial comments on feedback sheets. Evaluations were, year after year, indicative that students weren’t getting much out of the course at all.

The core curriculum in my faculty is designed to prepare students for completing their entire undergraduate studies in English. Students take a few English composition courses, a course in academic literacy, and the public speaking course. Critical thinking skills were dealt with successfully in the composition and literacy courses, but what about problem solving and teamwork skills? This is where public speaking should have come in. Students should be working together in pairs or small groups, or as a whole class team to debate and solve problems. When I learned of RTTP, it was an obvious solution. Having read up about the pedagogy, I chose the game Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403B.C. since it captured the origins of public speaking as we understand it, requiring students to reenact Athenian assemblies by giving speeches and participating in debates.

When we stated the game module in class, the students were very hesitant. They had never experienced anything like it in their studies before. They were nervous about the particular content, having no background knowledge of ancient Greece. The first few classes were made up of opportunities for the students to familiarize themselves with the context – they read from The Republic and the readings in the game booklet. They worked in groups to respond to discussion questions I created. I also provided them with some alternative readings to make the content easier to grasp. They quickly settled into the idea that over the next few weeks they would be transported to ancient Greece to take on the role of an Athenian man who would be a part of the decision-making team to figure out how to rebuild after the Spartan destruction of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.
When the first Assembly day came, the students reveled. They completely took over. I sat back, watched, and assessed the performance. The speeches were oddly much more natural than the previous ones in the course, considering they were delivered in character. The subsequent debates were heated and well-supported with ideas from readings not assigned; the students had gone and done their own research as well. They wanted to win, and they weren't afraid of the work that it took to do that. The shy students had studied diligently so that they could speak with confidence and win the debates with factual evidence. The confident speakers took notice of these efforts on the first day and came back with better evidence for the later debates. They strategized and negotiated terms with each other not only in the preparation classes, but outside class as well. They did excellent work with their speech outlines and reference lists, and were able to engage and maneuver through the complex dynamics of the debates. At the end of the course, I received some of the most enthusiastic responses in evaluations I had ever seen:

“...one of the most stimulating and fascinating academic experience I have ever had in my university life.”

“Overall, it was very fun and educational experience, not only for speech but historically as well. The chance to slip into a role and act out a different person’s character was fun and I would like to do it again.”

“Overall, this debate style turned out to be the best experience for me in my classes at Sophia, allowing everyone to utilize their critical-thinking skills to analyze and build up their own character’s personalities and characteristics.”

The RTTP pedagogy saved our public speaking course. The evaluations changed the minds of the curriculum committee members and a number of them even expressed interest in teaching one of the course sections themselves! I hope to adapt some of the other games for our learners in the very near future – perhaps we will try to save Galileo, or scrutinize Confucianism with the Wanli emperor. Whatever we decide, I know the students will be able to hone and develop skills they really need, not just in their university studies, but as adults entering their working lives after they graduate.

In conclusion, finding ways to get students to use English in a way that allows them to gain the critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork skills they need for their studies and after they graduate is of utmost importance. RTTP is just one recommendation, but we see it as launching a revolution in innovative education that offers English language educators in Japan an opportunity to make significant advancements when they are needed the most.

Reference
