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How CLIL classes exert a positive influence on teaching style in student centered language learning through overseas teacher training in Sweden and Finland

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Abstract

Recent reforms in Japan’s English language education policy have focused on improving student’s communicative ability with greater emphasis on practical conversation, debate, presentation skills and interdisciplinary use of English. Traditionally the focus of English education in Japan has been on grammar, vocabulary, reading and translation since high schools and universities use English for their rigorous entrance exams (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Curriculum reforms aimed at increasing communicative English will require teachers to improve their speaking ability but also adopt a more learner centered method of teaching.

In an effort to improve overall English language ability, support cross curricular diversity, encourage learner centered teaching, and promote internationalization and cultural understanding researchers at Osaka National University of Teacher Education have begun incorporating CLIL training into the teaching curriculum and overseas teacher training programme. The aim of the research was to investigate how using the CLIL framework influences student teachers to adopt a more student centered teaching style when working with 12 year old children.

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1. Overseas training programme

In 2013, Osaka University of Teacher Education in collaboration with Åbo Akademi University in Finland began an overseas teaching and study programme for Japanese student teachers. The programme was created with the following objectives:

- Give students the experience of learning in a CLIL classroom and applying that experience to teaching a CLIL lesson.
- Introduce students to learner centered teaching.
- Provide students the opportunity to use communicative English (with Focus on Form) and improve their listening and speaking skills.

For the student teachers to fully understand the dual focus on content and language, the CLIL classes and training are conducted in English. Students from all concentrations within the faculty of education are encouraged to participate and there is a wide range of language ability. In conjunction with the CLIL classes, a language chat room was created to assist students with their overseas teaching projects and help them improve their English communicative skills. To promote the interdisciplinary use of English, student teachers learn and teach together in teams consisting of a variety of majors including math, science, English, Japanese, social studies, and history.

The first five months of the programme take place in Japan with students learning about CLIL in English, creating lesson plans with their teams, preparing materials and practicing, and planning their trip to Finland and Sweden. Then for two weeks they travel to Sweden and Finland where they study about the countries educational systems and teaching practices. In addition to studying at Åbo Akademi University, they also observe classes at primary and secondary schools. The programme culminates when they teach their lessons in English to fifth and sixth grade Finnish students. Lessons have included math, science, history, and Japanese culture and language.

Through the programme student teachers learn about and experience the interrelationship between the 4 C’s: content, communication, cognition, and culture (Coyle, 1999). They must negotiate their own English ability and the ability of their Finnish students with that of the subject they are teaching. In preparing their CLIL lesson the student teachers must consider the vocabulary and grammar they will use to conduct class. Since they themselves are second language learners of English many students choose to Focus on Form (FonF) using targeted structures and repetition in meaningful contexts (Ellis et al., 2002)

To facilitate their teaching, the students must give consideration to classroom interactions between teacher and student and student and student. They must strongly consider the learning style of their Finnish students and adapt their teaching style within these cultural contexts. Dalton-Puffer (2011, p. 189) points out that “CLIL instruction has at times been constructed as a kind of catalyst for change in classroom pedagogies, implying that it somehow causes a shift from (traditional) teacher centered practices to (more innovative) student centered learning arrangements.” In relation to the Japanese student teachers their overall language competency is similar to the Finnish students they are teaching. As Dalton-Puffer (2011, p. 190) elaborates, this relative equality in language ability allows the student to “claim a larger share of the discourse space.”

2. Participants & procedures

The participants were Japanese university students (hereafter students) who aspire to be elementary school teachers. There were 10 students with an average age of 22. They had only been outside their own country on average 3.2 times. The average number times they had taught English in a foreign country was 0.3 and in Japan 0.8 times respectively. The students’ English proficiency ranged between 35 and 45 on the Versant test (http://www.versant.jp/e_about.html), which when converted, would be 500-700 on TOEIC. For many students it was very challenging to practice CLIL lessons only in English.

The children who received the CLIL lessons were 6th graders in Sweden and Finland (hereafter children). Each class had approximately 20 children. The children in both Sweden and Finland, whom the university students taught, live in a Swedish speaking area. They started learning English before 3rd grade and were able to understand science class in English. They were also able to ask questions and reply in English.

Pre-post questionnaires were given to the students about their perspectives on teaching CLIL lessons. The questionnaire had 6 Likert-scales and an area for students to describe their teaching experiences. The Likert-scales
focused on how the students’ thinking about CLIL lessons changed pre and post study. The descriptive answers were categorized based on the KJ method and focused on how the students were able to create a learning environment that was child centered; in which the children were able to interact with each other and critically think about the lesson (Kawakita, 1975; Scupin, 1997).

3. Results & analyses

3.1. Pre-Post questionnaires on CLIL lessons

The results of the questionnaire are listed in Table 1. Concerning Q1: Is it difficult to make a CLIL lesson? The data shows that the mean of Post (5.11) is higher than Pre (4.56) with 6 Likert-scales. However, when the Wilcoxon signed-rank test is used and there is no significant difference between Pre and Post in the same group (z=1.15, p>.05, N=10, n.s.). Concerning Q2: Is it enjoyable to make a CLIL lesson? The mean of Post (5.78) is higher than Pre (5.00). There was a significant difference between Pre and Post in the same group (z=1.15, p<.05*, N=10). In Q1 the sense of difficulty is increasing while in Q2 the amount of enjoyment is increasing as well. It can be said that students found the practice of CLIL lessons as considerably rewarding in the post questionnaire.

Table 1. Questions to university students on practice of CLIL lessons (N=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1  Is it difficult to make a CLIL lesson?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>p &gt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2  Is it enjoyable to make a CLIL lesson?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>p &lt; .05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3  Does your lesson allow children to express their thoughts and ideas?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>p &lt; .01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4  Is it difficult to use proper English in a CLIL lesson?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>p &gt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Q3: Does your lesson allow children to express their thoughts and ideas? The data shows that the mean of Post (5.78) is clearly higher than Pre (5.00). There was a significant difference between Pre and Post in the same group (z=2.7, p<.01**, N=10). It could be said that the students encountered the situation in which the children were trying to express their ideas narratively, participate in the task and debate actively through the framework of CLIL. They could elicit the children’s thoughts and ideas. It verifies that the students found the children’s way of thinking during the lessons much more than they expected in advance.

Finally Q4: Is it difficult to use proper English in a CLIL lesson? The mean of Post (4.55) is exactly the same as Pre (4.55). There was no difference between Pre and Post in the same group. It could be considered that the students found the practice of CLIL lessons in English difficult not only in “Pre task” and “On Task” but also in “Post Task”, in particular, it was challenging for them to understand the children’s opinions and share them with the class. However, Pre (4.55) out of 6 is not very high.

The lessons (i.e. science, art, and math) were conducted focusing on targeted structures. For example, Can you find the best balancing point? And what shapes can be made? Similar phrases and structures were frequently used including the use of the past participle and passive voice. Using FonF both the students and the children gained confidence in their speaking. As the students could more effectively elicit the children’s thoughts and ideas through the CLIL framework the lesson became much more child centered. Facilitating the shift was the students’ lesson preparation and their interactive teaching materials.
3.2. Analyzing Pre-post descriptive questionnaire

The students were asked on the questionnaire to describe specific example of how they created a learning environment in which the children were able to interact with each other and think deeply about the subject. The descriptions from the pre-post questionnaires were categorized with similar items grouped and assigned a representative sentence for each category. Both figures are schematized concept maps which demonstrate a transition from Pre to Post respectively. In Fig. 1 and 2, the superordinate concept is underlined, while the subordinate concept is placed below it.

![Concept Map](image)

As seen in Fig. 1, in Pre questionnaire (Pre and On Task) regarding “satisfaction in teaching CLIL”, students were satisfied with “the use of vocabulary diversity in relations to subject” which they chose (i.e., science, language & expressions, art & math). The students, who will become elementary school teachers, felt making CLIL lessons were a great opportunity to “learn diverse aspects of teaching multiple subjects not only English.” In addition, the students took great care in crafting their lessons in order to elicit the children’s thoughts and ideas. In the post questionnaire, it appears that the students felt the CLIL lessons were successful and that they could receive a good response from the children. The most prominent point of the students’ satisfaction in the post questionnaire was that “they found the rate of the children’s improvement on the topic” during the 45 minute lesson. They believed this was directly related to their planning and preparation.

One example was in a science class where students worked in groups doing an experiment on balance. The CLIL lesson was taught in a child-centered style in which the children had 25 minutes to complete several tasks including...
To inspire the children’s creativity and foster their critical thinking skills special consideration was taken to select the best possible teaching materials during a traditional Japanese art lesson. It was the students’ goal to create a CLIL lesson in which “the children could appreciate their own artwork.” The success of the lesson was the result of the students’ well-planned CLIL lesson but also from their professional knowledge and personal skills related to the subject.

The CLIL framework for eliciting children’s thoughts and ideas was referred to many times as the students discussed their teaching plans. When asked in the Pre questionnaire “How does the teacher create the 2 C’s?” the students responded that the opportunity to “use interactive talk in English” (child-child & teacher-child) was crucial during their micro-teaching preparation. (Fig. 2) The most important point was that the students “found that the children improved their understanding of the subject.” The students believed that the children’s’ improvement was...
brought about through their professional knowledge about the subjects taught and the child-centered teaching style they used.

Based on the results from a pre-questionnaire ten positive points about CLIL were identified. The students were then asked to choose which top 4 characteristics about CLIL they felt were most important. The following were the top three: 1) The student has close contact with children and different culture after the lesson. 2) The student learns diverse aspects of teaching multiple subjects not only English. 3) The student elicits children’s thoughts and allows children to share their ideas. Students also realized that they were able to improve their own English by repeating the targeted structures. They could easily recall the English expressions and use them because the sentences and vocabulary were closely connected with the contents.

4. Conclusion

Learning to teach is a challenging and rewarding process through which young teachers find an effective teaching style that allows them to engage and inspire their students. Through the CLIL framework in the overseas teaching programme the students not only challenged the children they taught to think critically and engage the material dialogically but they themselves were challenged by both the language and their ability to teach effectively. “For CLIL to be effective it must challenge learners to think and review and engage in higher order thinking. CLIL is not about the transfer of knowledge from expert to novice. CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understanding and be challenged – whatever their age or ability” (Coyle, 2005).

From the findings we conclude that the students adapted their teaching style to negotiate their own language ability. In the process, the children they were teaching became more vocal and actively expressed their ideas and opinions. As indicated by the surveys, the students found that engaging the children closely was very rewarding. It’s possible that this experience could positively reinforce a student centered teaching style for the new teachers. In the future, as the programme continues, it will be necessary to keep gathering data on the narrative discourse between student teachers and children in the classroom. A further study could determine if the overseas teaching programme affected their teaching style upon returning to Japan.

References


