

## Dealing with Mixed-language Abilities in an English-Medium University Content Course

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**Abstract.** Recently many universities in Japan have been increasing the number of content classes offered in English. From a teaching perspective, these classes come with a variety of challenges, perhaps the most significant being the teaching of university level content to groups of EFL students with very different linguistic abilities. These challenges are further complicated when the classes are also offered to native-speakers of English. This paper aims to address some of these issues, and offer some solutions in the form of a range of activities that were developed for a specific course at a university in Tokyo.

**Keywords:** content-based instruction; English-medium instruction; language-integrated learning; mixed-abilities, differentiated learning

### **Globalization and the Increasing Need for English**

The ever-increasing level of globalization has increased the need for speakers of other languages to gain competency in English, with some stating that it is now a prerequisite of gaining successful employment opportunities in the global business sector (Kung, 2013). Therefore, there has been a global increase in the number of people learning and using English world-wide, a fact which is evident by the increased demand for English as a foreign or second language (ESL and EFL) courses around the globe (McKenzie, 2010).

In part due to previous research based support (Johnson & Swain, 1997), and supported by linguistic theory (Krashen, 1985), one key educational movement is an increasing focus on content and language integrated learning (CLIL), a term first put forward by Krahnke (1987). This approach is seen to help learners gain the language and content knowledge needed for global business and academic needs. As discussed later, this is a trend which is currently gaining popularity in the Japanese university context.

### **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**

CLIL has been defined by Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols (2008) as a “dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for learning and teaching of both content and language” (p. 9). The popularity of using a target foreign language as the medium of instruction to teach both content and language started in Canada with a French immersion program, which resulted in both improved French proficiency and content knowledge (Johnson & Swain, 1997).

There have been many advantages put forward for students learning content in another language including its pedagogic effectiveness in terms of both content and language gains, and motivational effects (Wilkinson and Yasuda, 2013).

Although a CLIL approach has been shown to be effective, some research has highlighted the superior efficacy of achieving second language acquisition through a combination of language specific instruction, and foreign language CLIL courses (Swain, 1986). The skills and language gained from language specific instruction such as discussion skills are often seen to be integral to success in many CLIL courses. Nunan (1989), for example, argues that when using the second language (L2) to acquire content knowledge, learners are often required to use the language for communication in the classroom, where the focus is not on language itself, but on demonstrating knowledge of what has been heard, and to further discuss the concepts brought up. Therefore, some programs offer students English instruction while taking English-medium courses (Aloiau, 2008), while others such as the one described in this paper provide English training first, then offer CLIL courses later with no further EFL support.

### **CLIL in the Japanese University Context.**

Within a Japanese context, there has been a remarkable growth in the number of universities offering content classes in English. As of 2008, approximately 190 Japanese universities were offering English-medium academic content courses; a large increase compared to a few years previously (Miichi, 2010). This is a trend which has continued with the recent government-lead implementation of initiatives such as the Global 30, and Top Global University Project. For example, the Global 30 program alone, which was started in 2009, created an additional 155 English-only degree programs in Japan (Wilkinson, 2015).

### **Challenges of Mixed Abilities in CLIL Courses**

Being a relatively new phenomenon there is little advice outlining ways in which these classes can be taught, especially with regard to teaching CLIL courses to mixed language ability students. This paper aims to look at how one such class was taught in a private university, describing the activities and approaches that were used, and what the students’ perceptions of these were. It is hoped that this paper will offer real ways in which content courses containing students with markedly different backgrounds and language levels can be designed and run, and highlight some of the benefits such classes have for both English language learners and native speakers.

As a major goal of the Global 30 and Top Global University Projects was to increase the number of international students choosing to study at Japanese universities (MEXT, 2014, Shimamura, 2013), it can be assumed that a number of the newly created English-medium content courses in Japan will contain a mix of both Japanese and international students. There was evidence of this before the implementation of the above two initiatives (Aloiau, 2008; Miichi, 2010), so it follows that this situation has increased. If this is the case, the linguistic ability in the target language of the students is likely to vary significantly, therefore, the level of difficulty of the courses and the kind of support students need will be very different (Anderson, 1993; Hess, 2001). In addition, as these content courses are rarely streamed into language ability levels, not only will there be significant differences in the language proficiency between the international and Japanese students, but differences will likely exist between the Japanese students themselves.

In fact, the activities described in this paper below came from a practical experience of this situation from teaching English-medium content courses at a Japanese university in Tokyo. The course contained a number of native speakers of English (approximately 50% of those registered for the course), who not only had no linguistics problems regarding the medium of instruction (English), but who had already experienced taking numerous university lecture courses in English. On the other hand, the Japanese students enrolled on the course had no previous exposure to English-medium content courses, and had significantly different language proficiencies; something which was evident from class observations, as well as their varied standardized test scores (TOEIC).

Therefore, it quickly became clear during the first offering of this course that the significant differences in English proficiency, and the varied experience levels of taking English-medium courses was going to cause serious challenges to both the lecturer and the students. As a result, the curriculum was quickly reassessed and a number of activities, approaches and materials were designed and adopted in order to offer all students an achievable, rewarding and interactive experience. It was hoped that changes made would increase the content knowledge and cross cultural communication ability of all students, while also providing ample language learning opportunities for the non-native speakers of English. While not exhaustive, the main approaches, activities and materials are described below, and where appropriate, students' perceptions and feedback gained through observations, surveys, and informal interviews are also provided.

### **Case Study**

The content class in question contained about 35 students, half of which were Japanese and about half who were foreign exchange students at a private university in central Tokyo. Building on the research interests and experience of the teacher, the course provided a general introduction to Japanese culture entitled 'Japan Studies'. The class offered the foreign exchange students an insight into Japanese culture, and provided the Japanese students with a chance

to study about their own culture in English; improving their language ability along the way. Even though approximately 50% of the students were Japanese, many did not have a strong knowledge of their own culture and certainly would struggle explaining some aspects of their culture in depth in an academic setting, be it in Japanese or English. The class was originally created in order to give third and fourth year students an opportunity to study in English. Prior to the creation of this class, only first and second year students at this university received English education, in the form of first year comprehensive English classes, and second year classes aimed at discussing Japanese culture in English. The second-year course focused on the language needed to describe Japan and its culture, as well as more practical skills such as summary and response essay writing and discussion skills.

### **Students**

Generally the students could be divided into two distinct groups, each of which contained their own sub-divisions. On a basic level, the class was made up of 23 Japanese students and 27 foreign exchange students; however, within these two groups there were varying levels of both content knowledge and English abilities.

As far as the Japanese students were concerned, the class, 'Japan Studies', was designed to build on their experiences of the first two years of English education and move into actual content education in English. Therefore this class attracted those who were most interested in continuing with their English education. However, the students were at a variety of English levels ranging from lower-intermediate to 'returnee' students with near-native English competency. During the qualitative data collection, all of the non-native and non-returnee students indicated during interviews and on surveys that they had a range of difficulties with studying academic content in English. For some, there were problems with the level of materials, as all of the reading and articles required were of native academic level. Others faced difficulties in discussions, and felt a lack of ability to forcefully participate in debate, especially with native-level speakers. In addition, many of the Japanese students were uncomfortable in expressing their opinions in large groups. Based on observations from their previous English class, they felt capable within the confines of a small English language class, however in a class of sixty students of mixed abilities and nationalities, many felt reluctant to participate in some activities at first. Other linguistic challenges highlighted during the data collection included the speaking speed of the lecturer, and difficulty with the content vocabulary.

The foreign exchange students, who came from a variety of countries and majors, with about half of them coming from the United States, and the rest from Europe and Asia, faced a different set of challenges. Although about a third of the foreign students were English as a second language speakers, their English language skills were near to native-speaker level, therefore, English ability was not a major challenge. However, the content itself was challenging as most of the foreign exchange students had previously never studied about Japan and therefore had limited knowledge of Japanese culture and history. The majority

of the foreign exchange students came from business or international relations majors so the content was quite new for them. This meant that time had to be spent in class describing basic cultural ideas and concepts, which the Japanese students were well aware of. In addition, because of the native or near-native English level of the exchange students, there was a risk that the pace of the class, level of vocabulary, and amount of content covered could be below what they were used to, and therefore perceived as too simple or boring.

As can be seen from the above information, a key challenge from a teacher's perspective was that the class was made up of students from a variety of backgrounds and English abilities, with each group having their own strengths and weaknesses regarding the content course they were taking. It was felt that these issues needed to be tackled in order for the class to be as successful as possible for all students. The main challenge seemed to be with presenting materials which were not too high level or taxing for the Japanese learners, but that would not be so low as to de-motivate the native speakers. Therefore, the activities, materials, and approaches described below were developed to deal with the challenges described thus far.

### **Course structure and content**

As a result of observation, end-of-semester surveys (*anket*), and interview feedback obtained during and after the first year, the course was structured as described below. The changes were made in order to assist the students as much as possible with both content and language. From the second year, each class contained the same basic set of activities including a lecture given by the teacher, comprehension and discussion questions, and student presentations. In addition, students were expected to produce two written assignments in each semester; a presentation report and an article summary and response.

**Lectures.** Each week a short lecture of approximately 30 minutes, accompanied by a handout with gap-fills and questions, was delivered by the teacher. The aim of the gap-fill activity was to ensure that the students were fully engaging with the material by filling in missing information from the lecture slides. The spoken part of the lecture included much more information than was present on the slides, which meant that the students had to take notes as well. The purpose of this was to engage all of the students according to their individual level. Students with lower English ability could focus on the gap fill and try to fully understand the meaning of the slides. For those with higher ability, listening to the lecture provided further, more in-depth information. Also, for students with limited knowledge of Japan, the lecture provided further background information, which wasn't necessarily needed by the Japanese students, but was advantageous to many of the foreign students.

**Comprehension and Discussion Questions.** The questions following the lecture had two main purposes; comprehension checking and critical thinking. First, there were comprehension questions designed to test the students understanding of the material. These questions were aimed more at the students who didn't have English as a first language; however, they were still relevant for

all of the students. All students were given the option not to do the comprehension questions if they felt that they had fully comprehended the lecture. However, the students were reminded that the mid-term and final tests were based on the comprehension questions and therefore it was a useful exercise for everyone.

The second kind of question were critical thinking or discussion questions aimed at allowing the students to think about the content in a broader sense and place it within a wider framework of thinking (Nunan, 1989). These discussion questions were added in the second year of the program at the request of the foreign exchange students who wanted to engage more with the topics. All of the students had the opportunity to make requests for the course in the end-of-semester surveys. These requests were assessed by the teacher and added where appropriate. All of the students were expected to use the discussion questions, however, they were not checked in class as each group's discussion went in different directions. Instead, the teacher monitored and contributed in sweeps of the class. The discussion questions offered an opportunity for the students to discuss with their peers in small groups. The groups were self-selected and most students chose to mix both foreign exchange students and Japanese students. This was recommended by the teacher at the start of the course as a way of evening various abilities; those with higher English levels but less knowledge of Japanese culture could mix with people with lower levels of English but greater knowledge of Japanese culture.

As a result of both the comprehension and discussion questions, the students were able to help each other with their own difficulties. Many of the Japanese students initially struggled with participating in discussions, especially with students who were used to a more forceful approach to academic discussion. With the help of the teacher, the foreign exchange students were encouraged to invite responses from the Japanese students, and the Japanese students' confidence to speak in groups with their peers increased. Both groups of students were also very much interested in the personal experiences of their peers, and therefore all students could place the academic content within a more personal framework, as well as learning about other cultures.

***Presentations.*** In addition, the students were expected to conduct independent research in groups and present their findings to the class. The students were able to choose their own groups with a signup sheet system; however, most of the students seemed to choose according to the presentation topic as opposed to simply working with a friend. This resulted in many of the groups being made up of a mix of Japanese and foreign exchange students.

While mixed groups worked well for the discussions, overall this system didn't work as well as expected for the presentations. In many cases the native speaker seemed to have done more work because of their ability to read and speak English more fluently. Therefore in the future mono-background groups would encouraged to ensure that all of the students were participating fully. During the course, in the case of foreign-student-only and Japanese-student-only groups,

the presentations were of a higher standard and more fully researched. This may be due to the fact both students had to contribute a full workload as opposed to most of the work being done by just one student.

*Homework.* Finally the students were expected to read an article provided by the teacher and write a summary and response essay based on their reading. The Japanese students had learnt this style of writing in the previous year, and therefore were familiar with the format and organization, but many of the foreign exchange students were unfamiliar with both the rhetorical pattern and the formal aspects of academic writing. Therefore the teacher provided brief training on academic writing format and expectations. Due to the different workload that this activity represented to the native and non-native speakers of English, the foreign exchange students were expected to write a longer assignment than the Japanese students. However, as many of the foreign exchange students had little experience of writing summary-and-response essays, many struggled to summarize the main points of the article sufficiently. The challenge for the exchange students of being able to write a correctly formatted and organized summary, versus the challenge of reading a native-level paper for the Japanese students, represented different but equivalent workloads. When it came to marking these papers, the varying difficulties and achievements of the two sets of students could be clearly seen, and therefore offering different levels of requirements was appropriate to the situation.

### **Discussion**

By adopting a more flexible, student-centered, and differentiated approach, many of the challenges presented by having native English speakers and English learners of varying abilities taking English-medium content lectures together were successfully overcome. By drawing on the different levels of knowledge, language ability, and academic skills, all of the students were able to help each other to gain the most from the class. In the case of the Japanese students, they were able to actually use their English with their peers in a real situation. After being able to discuss and critically examine the course content with their peers, many of the Japanese students expressed a desire to continue with their English studies so that they could improve their conversational abilities. For the foreign exchange students, having access to people of their own age who could describe their culture and place the academic content within a real context was a great advantage. Not only could the Japanese students help them with understanding Japanese culture, but they could also form cross-cultural friendships. Many of the foreign exchange students commented that in their other classes they were only surrounded by other foreign exchange students. Therefore, having an opportunity to work with Japanese students was very advantageous. Overall, by adopting a flexible approach which blends some common EFL approaches with the delivery of authentic content, challenging and enjoyable CLIL classes were offered, even when dealing with hugely different cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities.

## Conclusion

As can be seen from the above case study, there are many challenges when teaching English-medium content classes to non-native English speakers. These challenges are further complicated when the student body represents a mix of native and non-native level English speakers who come from different backgrounds and academic majors. This case study shows that through a variety of activities these challenges can be overcome, so that all the students are able to gain from the experience. Given the advantages that were gained by both the Japanese and foreign exchange students, it is worth the time and effort needed to develop activities and a flexible, more student-centered approach that can help each group improve academically and linguistically. It is hoped that the methods described above can offer a base upon which further activities can be developed in the field of CLIL.

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