A CLIL Approach to Promoting Autonomy

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This paper reports the authors' yearlong experience of teaching/facilitating college English reading classes based on CLIL (content and language integrated learning). The goals of these classes were to help students develop a global view and autonomous learning habits through student-centered activities. 71 students studied Japanese sociology in English, focusing on the so-called Japanese Galapagos syndrome. Topics such as Japanese ethnocentrism and globalization were selected. The topics were about the students' own culture, so it was expected that they might enjoy opportunities to objectively and critically think about and research the topics. Class activities included extensive sociology readings and students' autonomous group research and presentations. After 30 lessons, more than half of the students provided favorable feedback on the group and individual activities, claiming that their global awareness and critical-thinking skills improved. Some showed further interest in learning about the topics on their own initiative.

この論文はCLILに基づく学習者中心の英語リーディングのクラスの授業実践の報告である。学生の自発的な学習力と幅広い視野を育てることに役立てるかどうかという研究目標のもとで4クラス71人の大学生の英語リーティングのクラスに於いて一年間活動を行なった。日本のリーディングクラスは教師中心、読み物も西洋の内容が多いが、この実践学習では日本社会の「ガラパゴス症候群」を取り上げ「自民族中心主義」や「集団的行動」を含む7つの話題を扱った。主なコミュニティ活動は学生中心の社会学論文の多読に基づく学生の自主的リサーチとその発表、クラス議論のリードなどである。コース終了後行ったアンケートでは学生の半数以上が英語で日本事情の学問的見解を学んだこと、それに基づいたグループ活動をしたこと、自発的に学習を進めたこと、客観的且つクリティカルに自国の文化について考えたこと、などの意義について好意的な見方を示した。

Currently although the ESL environments flourish in some Asian nations such as India, the Philippines, and Singapore, all of which have a history of being colonized by English-speaking nations, English is still considered an inconsequential foreign language in Japanese schools. Okatsu (2012) wrote that Japanese students do not seem to have any strong desire to be competent in English to survive in society; they may only think that being able to speak in English is simply "cool."

Some data on the English skills of Japanese students support this observation. For example, according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT), Japanese 12th graders' four English skills are all at the CEFR A1 level (MEXT, 2015). Some researchers blame these unfavorable results on Japanese teacher-centered classrooms (e.g., Abe & Terazawa, 1997; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Sugawara, 2004; Takahashi, 2003). Schools still focus on the memorization of facts for school entrance examinations and do not emphasize the need to develop critical-thinking skills (Suzuki, Ooi, & Takemae, 2006). The efforts to foster autonomous learners also deserve more consideration. Because Japanese learners do not need foreign language skills in everyday life, they quickly lose these skills after graduation. This is the environmental reason for the need of autonomous learners.

Another reason is the remarkable distance between the two languages (Lyddon, 2011; Okatsu, 2012; Yonehara, 2008). According to the Foreign Service Institute of the United States Department of State, American civil servants working overseas need 2,200 class hours of learning, on average, to achieve proficiency in Japanese, which is among the "hardest languages to master" (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007). Japanese learners may need the same amount of class time to gain a good command of English. Currently, Japanese elementary schools offer 70 English-class hours, middle schools offer 420, and high schools offer between 735 and 1,225 hours in total (MEXT, 2010). According to Okatsu (2012), English-class hours in Germany are 1.3 times longer and in the Netherlands 3 times longer than those of Japan, although these countries' native languages are closer to English. Matsumura (2009) wrote that Japanese school education

from elementary to high school would not create practical English users, but it may give learners the foundation to develop their ability later when needed, suggesting the need for autonomous learning.

Goals, Courses, and Participants

In this paper, we discuss four reading courses that we taught in 2017. The goals of this study were to observe students' learning of the reading topics in English and to promote the development of autonomous learning habits in content and language integrated learning (CLIL)-based reading and group activities. Determining teachers' roles in effectively assisting students as facilitators of student-centered activities was another goal.

CLIL has a long history in foreign language education in Europe and has drawn the attention of the Japanese government (MEXT, 2014). The general purpose of CLIL is to have students learn a new study subject in a foreign language. It also aims at developing students' higher level cognitive abilities and cultural/community awareness (Ikeda, Izumi, & Watanabe, 2016). In relation to study content, Little (2001) mentioned that autonomous learners relate psychologically to the content and process of learning and that study content is a crucial factor in enhancing language learning. Based on this idea, in this study Japanese sociology was chosen on the assumption that students would feel comfortable with a topic about their own society. Some specific topics in relation to the so-called Galapagos syndrome in Japan were chosen as the content. (This is a term of Japanese origin that refers to a highly developed local branch of an otherwise globally available product, as well as thinking that ignores global circumstances.) The seven selected sociological topics are shown in Figure 1. The participants were 71 college students consisting of freshmen and sophomores, males and females. They were all native Japanese speakers at English level CEFR A2-B1. Classes met once a week for 90 minutes and class sizes ranged from 8 to 24 students. All four classes were one-year courses (30 lessons). No students had previously experienced CLIL-based classes, group research, or presentation in English.

1st Semester	(1) Japanese ethnocentrism
	(2) Uniformity in Japanese society
	(3) Japanese inward-looking attitude
	(4) Japanese spirit of mutual assistance
2nd Semester	(5) Aging society and immigrants
	(6) Entrepreneurs in Japan
	(7) Japanese pop culture and high quality products

Figure 1. Topics for class activities.

Learner Autonomy and CLIL

Little (2001) wrote that an autonomous learner is one who understands the goals of a learning program and is willing to be responsible for learning as well as for taking initiative in reviewing and evaluating learning. Many researchers have viewed autonomy in the same way: Learners are responsible for every aspect of their learning (e.g., Dickinson, 1987). On the other hand, Holec (1981) and Benson (2001, 2011) defined autonomy as a capacity of learners and said that the aim of education is to nurture their capacity. In this study, the authors take Benson's viewpoint: Learners are potentially autonomous and institutional education helps them fully exercise their capacity as lifelong, autonomous learners.

In relation to learner autonomy, CLIL is said to have a strong potential to encourage students to actively participate in both independent and community-learning environments because it involves community work (Sasajima et al., 2015). Little (2001) wrote that collaborative work in small groups is very effective to nurture students' awareness of goals and autonomous learning by involving them in the learning process and making them feel responsible for their own learning. Thus, in this study, group work based on the CLIL method was expected to promote the autonomy of each member.

Reading Materials

The courses used three different kinds of reading materials to discuss each topic. The main textbook was *Good-bye Galapagos* (Stapleton, 2012). The author argues that Japanese people and society show some distinctive behaviors, such as a mania for fad items and extreme uniformity among service staff. The second major source of reading was excerpts from an academic text by a Japanese sociologist, *An Introduction to Japanese*

Society (Sugimoto, 2014). The book provided sociological data supporting the author's analysis of Japanese society. It also provided the students with authentic academic background knowledge through reading, discussing, and conducting their own research on selected topics. The third type of reading material was articles brought to class by the students. At the beginning of each semester, each class was broken into several groups of three to six members and each group investigated a topic from the list of semester topics (see Figure 1). They searched for informative articles relevant to the topic, studied them, and led the classroom readings and discussions.

Student-Centered Activities and Discussions on Students' Responses

Researchers of autonomous learning have suggested the use of activities including self-reflective, introspective, and retrospective reports; semi-structured interviews; and structured questionnaires (Cook, as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000; Wenden, 1998). Wenden (1998) wrote that self-reporting raises learners' awareness about their learning strategies, goal setting, and other learning attributes. She also pointed out that interactions such as discussion with teachers may change learners' beliefs and attitudes toward their learning. Little (2001) suggested that making learners reflect regularly to evaluate their individual or class progress is essential to developing autonomous learning. Thanasoulas (2000) also wrote that having learners self-report after activities can help make them conscious of what they have accomplished. In this study, the authors had learners work in groups, share responsibilities (work individually), discuss with teachers, and reflect on their learning after the activities.

Teachers' Roles

In autonomous learning, the teacher acts as a facilitator, counselor, and resource by creating and maintaining a learning environment (e.g., Benson & Voller, 1997). At the same time, some scholars say that the teacher's role is crucial in "launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat" (Sherrin, as cited in Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 63). In this study, the teachers supported students through creating worksheets and vocabulary check lists, helping them find articles, assisting them in leading class discussions, advising about their choice of presentation topic, commenting on their writing, and helping in other ways.

Figure 2 shows what students did for each topic, with teachers helping as needed, though teachers tried to encourage the students to be aware that they were responsible for their own work.

Classroom activities	Responsible party
(1) Preparation activities (vocabulary building, language focus, pre-reading discussions)	teacher
(2) Reading (incl. group reading, jigsaw reading)	students
(3) Comprehension questions/worksheets	teacher
(4) Class discussion	students; teacher
(5) Student-led article teaching & discussion	students
(6) Writing reflective essays	students; teacher
(7) Semester end student research and presentation & student-led discussion	students

Figure 2. Responsible party for each activity.

Activity 1: Jigsaw Reading (Collaborative Activity)

Students formed several groups and each group read a different part of the reading passage assigned by the instructor. After each group finished reading and confirming the information in their part, one member from each group made a new group with one member from every other group. Each member of the new group introduced the section that they were responsible for to the other members to create a whole picture of the entire reading. This popular reading activity seemed to encourage each student to be responsible for understanding the text and sharing it with other group members. This was mainly used for lengthy academic material. Although we did not directly ask students for feedback, jigsaw-group reading made students more engaged with the material than did solo reading. At the same time, it was not easy to encourage all students to seriously participate and contribute to the groups. English skills and the degree of motivation varied among students. Quiet students may have felt challenged by the activity, so we needed to pay close attention to each group's situation and offer help when necessary.

Activity 2: Teaching the Class About Student-Chosen Articles (Collaborative and Reflective Activity)

Each group performed research on an assigned sociology topic using the Internet and other resources and found an article on their topic. They were encouraged to find reading material that proposed an alternative viewpoint from the textbook. For example,

in discussing collective behavior among Japanese people, some groups selected activities and trends among Japanese youth that opposed social collectivism. In addition to teaching the class about their article, they were requested to prepare relevant questions to lead class discussions.

The benefits of this activity were that students focused on the content of their presentation and worked collaboratively. They also learned from watching and commenting on other groups' presentations. Miya (Class 2) wrote "Kenta did such a good presentation. I wish I could have done like he did." Rokhani (2012) cited Brown and said that learners can be more efficient autonomous learners through classroom activity that presents good models set by successful language learners. Seeing work presented by other groups may have encouraged students to autonomously try harder without the teachers' instructions.

The challenge of this activity was that the instructors were required to provide a fairly high level of assistance to the students, especially in supporting their understanding of the English in the articles and correcting the English they used for presentations. In addition, it was necessary to motivate students to do their best work. Even though they were resourceful and had the potential to be autonomous learners, they tended not to consciously strive to work as hard as they could have. Making them feel that they were responsible might have solved this problem, for example, by talking to or interviewing them regularly during the course, but this was too time-consuming for the teachers. A similar observation applies to Activity 3.

After the presentations, presenters in three classes were asked to answer an informal questionnaire. The questions were

1. What was your exact contribution?
2. What percentage of the total work did you contribute?
3. What are your afterthoughts about your presentation?

For Question 2, the total percentage given by all the participants in a group should be around 100%, but most of the time, it was more than 100% and sometimes closer to 200%. This may indicate students' positive view of independent work.

Most responses to Question 3 provided positive feedback about presentation experiences. No students had prior experience with group-teaching activities nor with English presentations, so many of their comments were about presentation skills, cooperation among group members, and English skills. Some students wrote about their appreciation of their group members' contributions to the projects and how much they learned from other members. They frequently commented that they felt

they had not contributed enough but would like to do better next time for the group by studying more. Thus, interdependent and collaborative learning seemed to encourage autonomous learning. Some examples of student comments (all names are pseudonyms and all responses have been translated from the original Japanese by the authors) include, "I think we found a good article, and it was fun to work in a group" (Yuko from Class 2). Another student wrote

> During discussion, there was an opinion that Germany accepted many refugees but their system might not be sufficient, and that could be a reason for incidents caused by refugees. I was completely convinced by the opinion. I felt that we should not only accept refugees but also guarantee their quality of life after accepting them. (Jun from Class 2)

There were also some negative comments. For example, Miho (Class 3) wrote, "We worked mostly individually and did not consciously try to make the presentation as good as we could."

Activity 3: Semester-End Research Presentation (Collaborative and Reflective Activity)

In the 14th class of each semester, students made a project presentation. They chose topics related to the Galapagos syndrome in Japan, set their own goals, and studied on their own. Students were also encouraged to propose possible solutions to the Galapagos issue of their choice if they thought it had negatively affected society. Some examples of presentation topics included the Japanese train system, vending machines, Akihabara, cancer prevention tests, Japanese water, Japanese school lunches, and hidden scenic spots. Students also led a class discussion following their presentation. One group's presentation was about the Japanese concept of *seken*. *Seken* is not a synonym for "society," but rather it is a distinct Japanese feeling about the watchful social environment they have to comply with. Students analyzed what *seken* really represents, how it has been developed, and how it works negatively and positively for Japanese people.

In this activity, most students displayed critical viewpoints and innovative ideas, although there were differences in level. Some examples of students' comments were "I studied about famous Japanese traditional sweets. By studying it, I deepened my understanding, and as a result, I wanted to know more about it" (Jain from Class 2) and "In the discussion at the end of our presentation, our classmates mentioned many advantages of Japanese railway systems in addition to what we had prepared. We really

appreciated it and were interested in their ideas" (Musashi from Class 3). Table 1 shows the varieties of students' comments on Activities 2 and 3. After presentation skills, group work was their primary concern.

Table 1. Breakdown of Students' Comments on Their Presentations

Students' comments	Count
Presentation skills (difficulties, positive ideas for improvement, etc.)	43
Group work (positive experience, points for improvement, etc.)	40
English (difficulties, motivation for further study)	28
Critical thinking (understanding of the context, future view, etc.)	28
Individual preparation (difficulties, points for improvement, etc.)	27
Presentation topic	20
Others	21

Postcourse Questionnaire

In the last class of the 30-week course, the participants were asked to answer a postcourse questionnaire. Questions and students' responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Reactions to Postcourse Questionnaire (*n* = 55)

Q1: Had you known about the "Galapagos syndrome in Japan" before taking this course?

Very well	1	Known a little	13	Not at all	41

Q2: If you had not known about it, did you become interested in the Galapagos syndrome?

Yes	15	Yes, to some extent	37	No	3

Q3: Would you like to know more about the Galapagos syndrome?

Yes, very much	4	Yes, if I have a chance	41	No	6

Q4: What do you think about learning sociology in an English course?

Yes, a good idea	31	Good but difficult	20	Normal English classes are better	4

Q5: Have you become able to think about other issues from various viewpoints after exchanging opinions in class?

Yes, very much	10	Yes, to some extent	43	No	1

Q6: Have you become able to think about various issues objectively after reading a variety of materials in class?

Yes, very much	7	Yes, to some extent	48	No	0

Q7: Have you learned how to research on a topic through article presentation?

Yes, quite a lot	11	Yes, to some extent	43	No	1

Q8: Have your English skills improved by reading academic resources?

Yes, quite a lot	9	Yes, to some extent	45	No	1

Q9: Have you gained some confidence in your reading skills through reading authentic materials?

Yes, very much	8	Yes, to some extent	44	No	3

Note. Not all students answered all the questions.

The most valuable thing we learned from the student survey was that the students were not certain whether or not they were initially interested in taking a CLIL-based class. In Question 4, 36% of students responded that learning a new subject in English was difficult, and 8% preferred a traditional-style, teacher-centered reading class focusing on vocabulary building, sentence grammar, reading comprehension quizzes, and so on. Because our courses also provided all of these traditional activities, it seemed that group work (reading, research, teaching, and presentation) and writing opinion essays were a large extra task for the students. Although 61% of the students were favorably inclined towards a CLIL-based class, the rest of the students felt there was some need for improvement; in fact 8% were clearly dissatisfied with the CLIL approach. At the same time, the responses to Questions 1 and 2 indicated that learning about topics related to Japanese culture for the first time made them curious and motivated, and some students indicated their intent to learn more about these topics on their own. This indicates the merit of the content-based CLIL approach.

A surprising discovery was that the students seemed to feel that they had learned the process of research and how to think critically. We had not expected the students to clearly acknowledge the cognitive effects of their research activities. In answering Questions 5, 6, and 7, most reflected that they had learned how to analyze issues from

multiple perspectives by exchanging opinions with their classmates and that they also had acquired some ability to analyze issues from different viewpoints by reading various materials. Giving students a variety of reading materials for discussion may have helped to develop their critical-thinking skills. The students' responses to Questions 8 and 9 indicate that they felt their English reading skills had improved through reading academic texts on sociology as well as online articles, which also supports this point.

Additionally, 16 students contributed responses to the request for voluntary open-ended comments on the course at the end of the questionnaire. Many comments were about the topic, Galapagos syndrome. Students stated that it was a good opportunity to study features of Japanese society and its uniqueness by comparing Western and Japanese perspectives. The following is an example of one student's reflection of the course related to her presentation:

> Searching for good articles and reading them intensively, I could establish my position towards Japanese ethical standards for the first time in my life. And the teacher shared her experience and thoughts with us that deepened my ideas and also class discussion. I'm glad I did this presentation. (Mari from Class 1)

Some students also wrote supportive comments such as that it was a good chance for them to learn about current societal situations that they had not known about and it had motivated them to learn and think critically. At the same time, there were negative comments. For example, some students did not like reading difficult academic texts, and one student wanted to be in a traditional-style, teacher-centered English grammar class. Further comments are included in the Appendix.

Conclusion and Limitations

Students' reflective comments and responses to the postcourse questionnaire seem to show that they became interested in the content of the course and were more motivated to study it. In addition, many students wrote that they enjoyed group work (research and presentations) as well as individual work, and they felt their English skills and critical-thinking skills had developed to some extent. They reflected that the study was challenging but valuable. Therefore, we believe that students have benefited to some degree from collaborative-style autonomous learning in their classes. However, actual development of students' skills in English reading, researching, and the effects of autonomous working were not assessed through objective measures, so there are no statistically clear results. Studying learner autonomy seems to involve many factors, and more rigorous planning would have been needed to measure improvements in English skills as well as autonomous learning abilities.

Lastly, we felt that we needed to pay more detailed attention to students' activities in this program than in typical teacher-centered reading classes we had previously taught. Benson (2001) suggested that "autonomy could be developed by a shift in relationships of power and control within the classroom" (p. 13) from teacher to learner. The authors feel this student-centered education goal is not easy but is certainly worthwhile.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Examples of Students' Comments From the Post-Course Questionnaire (Class 1)

(Actual student names are not used to ensure anonymity.)

(1) A good chance to know about current Japanese situations and how the world sees Japan

> Considering Japanese phenomena from foreign perspectives has encouraged me to study more in addition to acquiring English abilities. (Keiko)

> It was a good chance to learn about Japan because we Japanese seldom have chances to study about our own country in English, especially how foreigners see us. (Yu)

> I learned about Japan's position in the world from the course. I also realized Japan has unique features in comparison with those of other nations. (Miyu)

(2) Difficulty of authentic materials

> Since the articles were difficult, it was hard for me to understand them. (Sari)

> Frankly speaking, it was difficult for me to learn about a society in English. However, I have never had such a course and I gained satisfaction from it. (Saori)

(3) Beneficial class

> This was the most beneficial class for me. I wanted to buy Sugimoto's book we used in class. (Takako)

> It was very difficult but it was a good chance for me to work hard to catch up with the content of the articles. It was beneficial to me. (Anna)

(4) Improvement of English abilities

> I had studied only English grammar and how to comprehend English passages (word by word before I took this course), but I studied academic content in English in this course. (Thanks to this course,) I have learned to use English practically. (Masa)

I have learned how to comprehend the content when reading English sentences by focusing on verbs. I have gained confidence (in reading English sentences.) (Mina)

Summary assignments were challenging but it was good because I read the article again and organized the content (to write a summary). (Yuki)

Since Dr. Sugimoto's articles were difficult, it took much time for me to understand them and I could not get good grades on exams. However, it was a good chance for me to try to communicate what I wanted to say in English and think how I would say it in English on my daily life. Therefore, I sometimes recognized my English ability was improving. (Sai)

(5) A good chance to think objectively

I was able to think a little objectively from new perspectives by learning merits and demerits of Japanese society in English. (Yu)

I think I was able to think more by myself (by learning the content in English) rather than learning about only English grammar. It was difficult and challenging but I think I acquired much (knowledge and English abilities). (Kei)

Japanese society has many problems such as a decrease of young entrepreneurs, insufficient working conditions for women, falling birthrate, and an aging population. Furthermore, many of these have not been solved by other nations yet. I appreciated the chance to consider such issues again. (Yu)

I did not know Japan had fallen into a Galapagos syndrome, but I (learned about it in this course and) considered what Japan should do in the future through this course. It was good. (Yuka)