



Transforming University English with CLIL Curricula: An In-depth Case Study

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How will universities throughout Japan meet future challenges of enhancing students' English academic skills to achieve MEXT goals, prepare students for study abroad and EMI courses at home, and boost overall international English-language competitiveness? Adopting CLIL-based curricula is one promising solution. Based on a four-year MEXT grant to researchers at four major universities, this article describes action-research curricular reform of a first-year English program with 230 students. Its research objective was to design an effective content-based curriculum to improve academic readiness for study in English and significantly boost TOEFL scores. The researchers/curriculum designers examine the reform background, innovative steps taken, significant difficulties encountered, initial results, and remaining challenges. In Year 1, a pilot was conducted in which three of 16 classes adopted a partial CLIL curriculum; in Year 2, all 16 classes engaged in coordinated four-class-per-week study of liberal arts fields including sociology, economics, earth science, biology, and natural history; in Year 3, this CLIL study expanded to five classes a week. For the past 10 years, the curriculum designers' university has used the TOEFL ITP as a benchmark for English improvement, administering the exam to students at the beginning and end of their first year. In 2022, the year of the first full implementation of the CLIL curriculum, students' TOEFL ITP gain was 140% greater than the average score gains in the previous seven years. In 2023, the score gain of students was 107% higher than the seven-year average. In Year 4 of the curriculum reform (2024), researchers-curriculum designers hope to share curricular materials on a common platform to partner with other universities.

日本の大学は、文科省の基準を満たしEMIや留学に適したレベルまで学生の英語力を向上させ、国際的な競争力を高めることが求められている。かかる課題に対する有望な解決策がCLILベースのカリキュラムである。本稿では、4大学の研究者らによる4年にわたる科研費プロジェクトを元に、230名の学生を対象とする初年次英語プログラムのカリキュラム改革のアクションリサーチを報告する。カリキュラム設計担当者の所属大学では過去10年にわたり、初年次の開始時と終了時にTOEFL ITPを実施し、学生の英語力の伸びを測る指標としてきた。CLILカリキュラム完全実施の初年度にあたる2022年度には、学生のTOEFL ITPスコアの伸びは、過去7年間の平均得点上昇に比して140%増を達成、2023年度のスコア増は7年間平均を107%上回った。カリキュラム改革4年目の2024年度にあたり、他大学との連携を視野に、本カリキュラム教材を共通のプラットフォームで共有することを期している。



Although the pace of curricular change in Japanese higher education may be slow, there are signs of change. As Brown and Bradford (2019) observe in their extensive scholarship on CLIL and EMI in Japan,

government policies and market forces are aligning to encourage more classes taught in English. The Japanese government is now financially supporting EMI initiatives through grants to a number of universities, first with the Global 30 Project, then with the Go Global Japan Project, and more recently with the Top Global University Project. (p. 104)

Brown and Bradford further note: “The adoption of EMI in Japanese universities follows the worldwide trend toward internationalizing higher education” (2019, p. 104). Underscoring this continued shift towards English in Japanese higher education, Brown (2023) more recently reports, “[m]ore than 40 percent of Japanese universities now offer specialist content courses [EMI] taught in English” (p. 3). This increased emphasis on English proficiency and English-medium instruction can also be seen in the Ministry of Education’s (MEXT) support for projects like the multi-year *Kakenhi* grant to the author-researchers, members of four prominent liberal arts universities, to redesign the first-year English curriculum at one particular institution as a possible model for other universities to follow.

This increased focus on English is also expressed in the growing emphasis on liberal arts study. According to the *Daigaku Times* (2020), 56 out of 805 universities in Japan are promoting liberal arts. In addition, following the end of Covid-19 restrictions, universities are re-launching overseas studies programs. Based upon these initiatives, courses, and programs, throughout Japan, universities (and university English departments) face significant challenges in designing curricula and achieving better English proficiency outcomes. Among these are:

- To better engage students in their initial study of academic English
- To better prepare students for EMI courses in their further university study
- To better ready students for overseas study at English-speaking universities
- To better achieve benchmarks in TOEFL—or TOEIC or IELTS—at their institutions
- To better support emerging Ministry of Education (MEXT) initiatives in liberal arts and EMI curricula.

Country-wide Context: Low English Proficiency and Lack of Liberal Arts

The curriculum reform described in this article—and the Ministry of Education’s initiatives outlined above—are motivated in part by a grim backdrop: Japan’s low English proficiency relative to other countries. In 2023, Education First (EF) ranked Japan 87th out of 113 countries, noting a continuous downward trend in its ranking since 2011 (Nippon.com). According to ETS (Educational Testing Service), for the past 20 years Japan has recorded among the lowest average TOEFL scores in Asia. For instance, in 2022 it ranked third from the bottom in Asia with an average score of 73, above only Laos and Tajikistan with their scores of 70 (ETS, 2023a).

What is to account for this lackluster performance? Traditional explanations for low TOEFL scores include an excessive emphasis on grammar in secondary education in Japan (Snyder, 2019); an unfair linguistic advantage enjoyed by other Asian countries colonized by English-speaking nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines; and a higher percentage of Japanese taking the TOEFL, lowering the national average (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019; Reedy, 2000; Takeno & Moritoshi, 2018). These explanations, however, overlook the fact that other Northeast Asian nations, like South Korea and China, consistently outperform Japan in English achievement. These nations have not historically been governed by English-speaking colonial rulers and yet have a similar history of using grammar- and audio-lingual instruction, followed more recently by communicative-based approaches.

A more plausible explanation for the historically low TOEFL scores, which is a major concern at the case-study university, is that unlike the materials in commonly used high school and university English textbooks, the TOEFL primarily assesses students’ comprehension of traditional liberal arts content through reading passages and brief academic lectures. “Most items that you will encounter on a TOEFL test tend to be drawn directly from university-level textbooks, from the courses that students would typically encounter *in a first- or second-year liberal arts class*,” observes the executive director of the TOEFL at ETS (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020 [emphasis added]). As stated on the ETS website (2020), the TOEFL ITP reading test is “designed to measure the ability to read and understand short passages similar in topic and style to those read in courses taught at North American universities and colleges.” The ITP is the version of the test that is most commonly used by Japanese universities (see the following section), and passages featured in it reflect this intention and content. Therefore, the materials most students use to study English in both high school and university do not match the liberal arts focus of the examination.

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Expanded TOEFL Use in Japan

At the institution where the curriculum reform described in this article was implemented—a major university with eight faculties (*gakubu*) and three campuses—first-year students across all departments and divisions are required to take a pre- and post-TOEFL ITP during their initial year. The effectiveness of each respective English program is evaluated based upon their performance. This is not an isolated or unique usage of the exam. Educational Testing Service, the organization which creates and distributes the TOEFL and TOEIC, reports that 153 universities in Japan now use the TOEFL ITP for admission, placement, performance evaluation, pre/post tests, overseas program eligibility, and other purposes (2023b). (Many other universities, ETS (2023b) notes, use the TOEFL iBT, TOEIC, or IELTS as a performance benchmark.) To the knowledge of the researchers-curriculum designers, no other English language test is used as widely in the Japanese university context. This is a principal reason why the TOEFL ITP serves as a major curricular outcome in reform described in this article, and why the curriculum designers chose a CLIL approach focused on the liberal arts areas upon which TOEFL content is largely based.

Curricular Innovation: The CLIL Approach Rather than only CBI

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and CBI (Content-Based Instruction) are two overlapping approaches in English language teaching, though each has its own focus and methodology. CLIL in particular integrates language learning with the learning of subject content, enabling students to develop language skills while engaging with academic material. Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) describe CLIL as a methodology that considers content and linguistic outcomes on an equal footing, emphasizing the simultaneous learning of language and subject matter. In CLIL classrooms such as in the case-study university, teachers use content as a vehicle for language acquisition, providing language support and scaffolding while teaching subject content (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). By contrast, CBI focuses more on language learning which might occur incidentally through exposure to academic material. While both CLIL and CBI include language and content learning, CLIL places greater emphasis on the simultaneous teaching of language and subject matter. (See Brown and Bradford's 2016 "EMI, CLIL, & CBI: Differing Approaches and Goals" for a detailed examination of each of these paradigms, which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.) The CLIL blend of content and language instruction better serves most Japanese university students, such as students at the case-study university, at their present level of academic

readiness, and is consequently more likely to boost their academic readiness and TOEFL performance.

Curricular Innovation: the Aims of CLIL Modules

Prior to curriculum reform, the first-year English curriculum in the case-study program—like those at many universities—was based primarily on monolingual EFL textbooks, and their reading, listening, writing, and vocabulary activities. Students also engaged in extensive reading through the online program Xreading, and did some TOEFL practice. The main flaw in this curriculum was that the commercial textbooks featured broad topics like globalization, energy, and aging, but none were explored in depth because of the texts' emphasis on communicative tasks and general language forms rather than on key concepts, core subject matter, and related vocabulary (Wadden, Onoda, & Van Amelsvoort, 2023). Most commercial texts offer little sustained content to students, and do not introduce them—step by step—to the basic concepts, questions, and issues in particular fields such as earth science, economics, and sociology. They therefore fail to introduce students to the concepts and language of “university-level textbooks” in “first- or second-year liberal arts class[es],” upon which TOEFL content is based (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020) and which also prepare students for EMI courses.

By contrast, the liberal arts modules—60- to 70-page texts—that the curriculum-designers drafted as core materials for the curriculum's CLIL approach assume that “students are engaged in a joint learning practice of subject matter and foreign language” (Smit and Dafouz, 2012, p. 1), and along with learning English, students will acquire foundational knowledge in specific content areas. Among the challenges to this approach is to use language that is accessible enough for students to understand the conceptual knowledge taught in class and to gauge how much content-knowledge first-year students already know so that the curriculum is neither too specific nor too basic.

Because this balance is hard to achieve, and very little content-based material is available commercially, teachers and curriculum designers must create their own materials (Wadden, 2021). For that reason, the curriculum designers themselves wrote six modules (60–70-page instructional texts) in Health and Medicine, Zoology, Natural History, Sociology, Economics, and Earth Science. These were initially written at two different levels of difficulty: a basic level that has fewer passages and covers a more limited range of topics, language structures, and vocabulary, and a standard level that has more reading and listening passages and covers a wider range of topics within each discipline. Each module features 3–8 reading passages and 5–12 condensed academic



lectures and TED Talks, 60–80 key vocabulary related to the particular subject area, 80–100 broad target vocabulary, and reading and listening comprehension exercises that provide TOEFL-like practice.

Discontinuity in English Language Curricula: Another Consideration

Another factor curriculum designers must keep in mind is the English instruction that students have previously been exposed to. Underwood and Glasgow (2019) characterize the context of Japanese university English instruction as follows:

There is no formal continuity between high school and university curricula stipulated by MEXT, so university instruction does not begin where high school courses end. In general, freshman students are required to take 90 hours of English in total to graduate (equivalent to two 90-minute classes a week for two semesters of 15 weeks each), though many universities require English study during sophomore year, too, and offer further electives for juniors and seniors. (p. 154)

The vast majority of university courses in Japan, regardless of subject, are offered in once-a-week sessions called *koma*, typically taught by an individual professor for 90 minutes. The school year consists of two terms, each lasting 14–15 weeks. In this context, a professor selects the course materials and teaches a semester- or year-long course with 14–30 class meetings. This system is also one of the causes of the relative ineffectiveness of university language instruction. Nearly every language learner knows that studying a foreign language once a week is insufficient to achieve meaningful results.

By contrast, since its founding in 2015, the researchers' program has been organized around four 90-minute English lessons per week, twice as many. Using shared texts, two partner teachers—one non-Japanese and the other Japanese—co-teach this 4-*koma* weekly sequence. All are full-time teachers. This arrangement provides overall cohesion to the curriculum, allowing the 240 first-year students to study the same materials and be graded uniformly—with some course-level adjustments—in classes of 13–15 students. Since lesson-planning, course materials, and evaluation are all coordinated, this curricular structure is better organized and provides more teacher-student interaction than in many other Japanese institutions. Despite this curricular coordination and 4-*koma* core, for the six years leading up to the full implementation of the new curriculum (2015–2021), students showed only a marginal improvement in their TOEFL ITP scores—an average of 14 points a year—which caused senior administrators to become skeptical of its effectiveness.

Considering the points above led the researchers-curriculum designers to a key hypothesis: *One major curricular shortcoming of Japanese high schools and universities in preparing students for English-medium study at the university level, domestically and internationally, is overlooking liberal arts content. This is evidenced by lack of preparedness of EMI courses, poor TOEFL performance, and low English proficiency.* Therefore, their research objective is to design an effective content-based curriculum that will improve students' academic readiness for university-level study in English and significantly boost TOEFL outcomes. Among the further aims of the project—and probably key to its Ministry of Education support—is to subsequently share the curriculum and its materials with other universities in Japan struggling to improve students' content knowledge, language skills, and performance outcomes. The curriculum reform was organized into 4 phases:

- 2020 Phase 1: Choice of liberal arts topics and initial draft of modules
- 2021 Phase 2: Adoption of modules for partial use with 3 pilot classes (12 control group classes continued with the previous curriculum), further development of module contents
- 2022 Phase 3: Use of liberal arts modules with all classes, dual development of mid-level and basic versions
- 2023 Phase 4: Continued use of modules for all classes with further support and scaffolding materials and introduction of content tests for each module.

Curricular Innovation: Module Construction

During the first two years module contents were written by the faculty. Content topics were chosen based upon an analysis of the content topics of 10 TOEFL ITP tests (Wadden, et al., 2001), courses students might take in the future, and the historical identity of the university. Among the subject areas often on the TOEFL are zoology, geology, sociology, and economics. Sociology and economics (and health) are also popular 2nd-year courses, so CLIL modules on these topics had the additional benefit of preparing students for future coursework. The next two years of curricular reform (2022 and 2023) involved large-scale collaboration among faculty and teachers, who refined module passages, added further learning activities, and created an online workbook of scaffolded reading, vocabulary, speaking, and writing exercises. The workbook was an excellent way to adjust for language differences among the basic-, mid-, and higher-level classes. During the final year (2023), content tests were created and administered at the end of every module to assess whether students had learned the basic concepts presented in them.



Figure 1
Cover Illustrations from 3 Modules



Curricular Innovation: Arrangement of Module

The learning materials within the modules are arranged in the following sequence, though individual teachers may change the order, add activities to give more support, and prioritize reading or listening based on how they split the workload with their partner teacher.

1. Introductory discussion questions intended to spark curiosity and activate prior knowledge.
2. A bilingual list of subject-specific academic terms, which is also available on Quizlet (n.d.) to offer a variety of independent learning activities and to allow students to personalize the lists. To make deeper connections with words, students also keep vocabulary notebooks.
3. Reading passages with liberal arts content that start with general overviews of the field (the main areas of Earth Science or the principle fields sociologists study)

and then proceed to passages on particular topics (the geology of mountain-building, the sociology of territorial space). Building intellectual and lexical understanding of the field is the main goal. In order to teach and promote the use of reading strategies, students read through a passage, annotate it by highlighting key sections, underline confusing or unknown parts, and summarize sections. This annotation of texts improves multiple reading skills, cultivates overall study skills, and encourages independent learning of essential concepts (Groen, et al., 2021).

4. Following initial attempts at comprehension, students may consult the Japanese translations of reading passages at the end of the module to assist them in confirming understanding.
5. Listening content consists of brief lectures and online videos which reinforce and extend the readings, and through which students receive instruction and training in taking notes while listening to a lecture. In addition, students are often required to visually arrange material, which aids in their learning and retention of key vocabulary and concepts (Jiang, 2012).
6. Content acquisition is evaluated by short-answer examinations. Since students are aware that they will be accountable for understanding concepts, this encourages focus not only on language but also on content. Moreover, since all first-year students take these tests, they offer a common university experience and a chance to share knowledge and opinions across classes and language-skill levels.
7. A variety of additional tasks are intermixed with other activities, such as discussions and student self-assessment of what they knew before and after their content study.



Figure 2
Sample Text from Sociology Module

Reading for Knowledge 1: An Introduction to Sociology



Read and annotate the following passage. Be ready to share your annotations with your classmates.

Annotation

1. Sociology is often defined simply as the “study of human social relations,” yet such a definition is too general, because other fields within the social sciences—including economics, political science, psychology, and even history—also study human social life. In contrast to sociology, however, these other fields focus on a particular area of human activity such as economic behavior or political organization. The field of sociology, on the other hand, offers a broad perspective on human activities that distinguishes it from the more specific viewpoints of other academic fields.

Curricular Innovation: Content-Related Extensive Reading

Since reading fluency is also an important language skill and valuable for academic study, the new curriculum continues to use Xreading, the online extensive reading program, but in a new way. As prior to the curricular reform, students must read between 50,000 and 110,000 words per term, contingent on their class level, but about 40 percent of the texts are specific works thematically associated with the liberal arts modules, such as a story about scientists making an expedition to a volcano, *Volcano Trek*, when studying Earth Science, and *Amazing Entrepreneurs and Business People* while studying Economics. These assigned books reinforce and broaden students’ vocabulary by exposing them to target words in a fresh context and help them consolidate the concepts they are studying.

Lower- and mid-level classes use adapted modules, materials from the online Workbook, and a slightly different methodology. The conceptual essence of the passages is preserved but excessively complex wording is removed by editing. A larger variety of academic and general vocabulary is introduced, with an emphasis on formulaic language frequently used in academic discourse (Durrant, 2018). Concept checks and schema activation are the first steps in each module. After that, a lecture-based listening exercise introduces specific discourse features (e.g., cause and effect language, lecture overview techniques, and time adverbial clauses). In addition to previewing important vocabulary, this serves to highlight specific discourse elements and enable the substantial repetition of vocabulary that is required for acquisition (Pellicer-Sanchez, et al., 2022; Walqui & van Lier, 2010; Webb & Nation, 2017).

Significant Results to Date

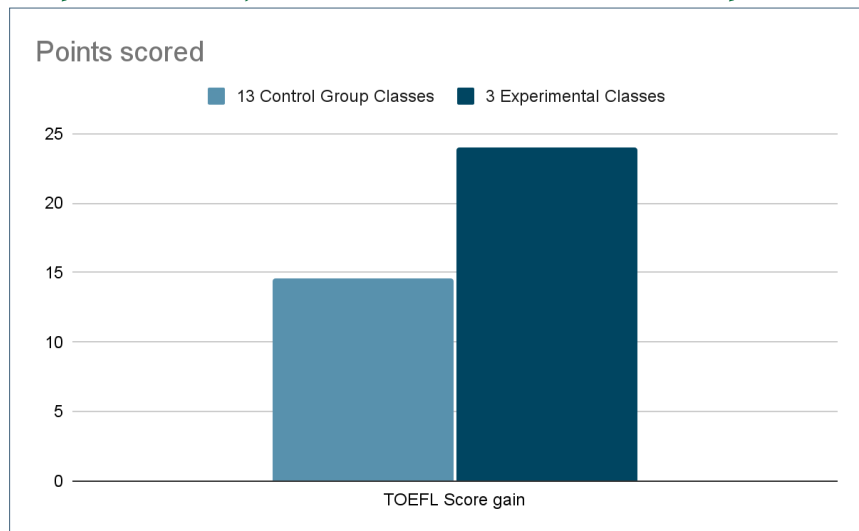
The adoption of the new CLIL curriculum has led to significant outcomes.

As indicated earlier, the program’s approximately 240 first-year students take the TOEFL ITP in April and then again in late December of their first year. The university administration places great emphasis on ITP score gain as achievement and proficiency indicators across all of its faculties and undergraduate programs and each reviews the current year performance in comparison to the previous historical averages, for example, in the case of the case study faculty, annual score gain from 2015 to 2020. For this reason, the researchers-curriculum designers approached the reform with prudence and caution. In 2021, three out of 16 classes were chosen to partially pilot early prototypes of the Liberal Arts modules: One teacher in the three experimental sections used the traditional course materials for two classes each week, while the other teacher of the experimental group used a prototype of the liberal arts modules in the other two classes. Students in the 13 Control classes using the traditional curricular materials had a 14.6 TOEFL ITP score gain from April to December (almost exactly the same as the average 14-point score gain over the previous 6 years). However, the average score increase in the three Pilot classes using the Liberal Arts modules in one-half of their class meetings was +24 points. This was 74% higher than the 13-class control group.



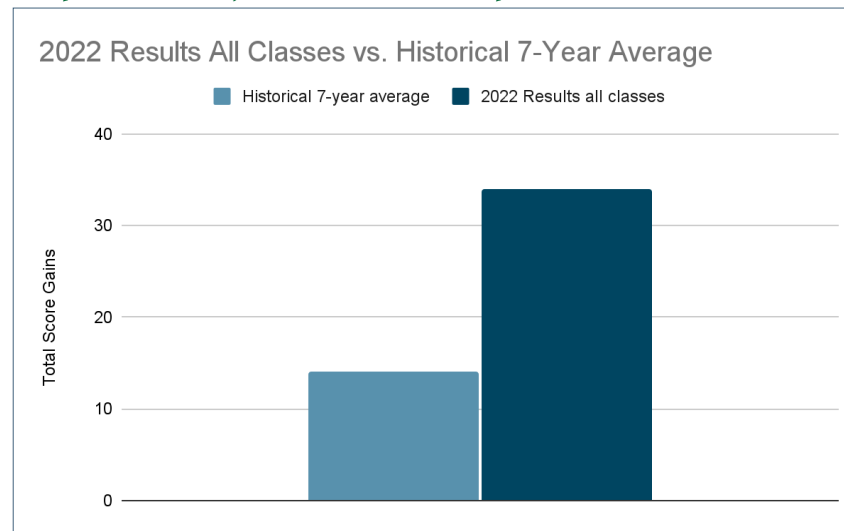
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Figure 3
Comparative Results of 2021 Pilot TOEFL Score Gain between Groups



In 2022, the new CLIL curriculum was fully implemented, and the Liberal Arts content modules were used by all teachers across all 16 classes. While the 2021 pilot provided reasons for optimism, the 2022 results were even more robust than expected. The entire first-year cohort showed an average gain of 34 points versus the 14-point, seven-year historical average from 2015 to 2021. This was a 140% higher score gain with the new CLIL curriculum.

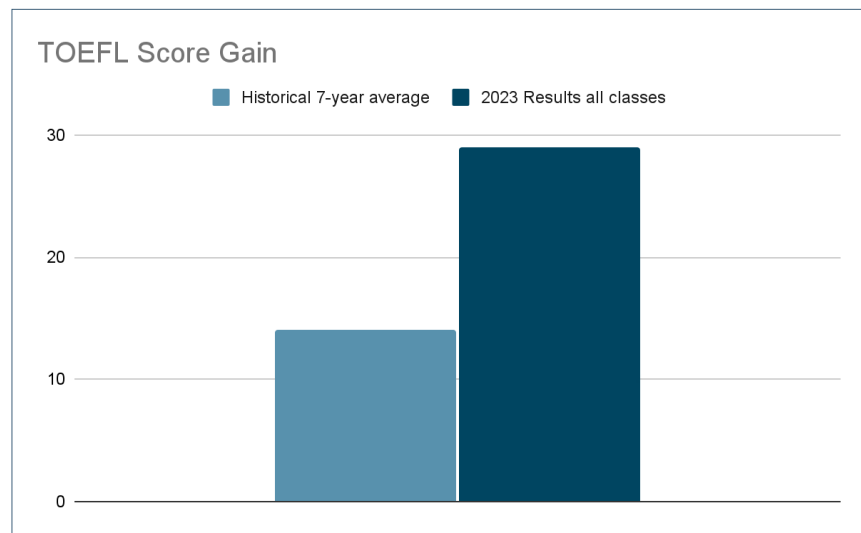
Figure 4
Comparative Results from Full Curriculum Implementation in 2022



During 2023, a new online Workbook was collaboratively created by teachers, module content was further developed, Content tests were implemented, and an additional *koma* was added to the students' English study (now 5 *koma* in total). Once again the students' TOEFL score gains from April to December greatly exceeded the 14-point historical average. The 16 classes of students recorded a 29-point gain, 107% higher than the historical average.



Figure 5
Comparative Results from Full Curriculum Implementation in 2023



In addition to using TOEFL benchmarks, the researchers also conducted brief Student Satisfaction surveys to assess how the students perceived the instructional materials. In the spring of 2023, 161 students out of 240 responded to a Google Form soliciting feedback. In response to the question, “What do you think about your current English classes?” the vast majority responded “very good” or “excellent.” Unfortunately, no such surveys were taken in the seven years prior to the curriculum innovation, so there is no basis for comparison. However, curriculum-designers will continue to gather student evaluation in the future and monitor student perception of the curriculum.

Conclusion

First of all, has the implementation of the CLIL Curriculum achieved its goal at the case study university? The answer is a fairly emphatic, “Yes.” However, the curriculum designers—and other universities that wish to adopt similar reform—face a number of challenges. For lower- and mid-level classes at the case-study university, more scaffolding for content learning needs to be developed. In particular, to smooth students’ entry into

academic reading and listening passages, more preview and activation activities should be created; more frequent review of key concepts and vocabulary integrated into course study; and more repetition of content and skills through re-reading, re-listening, re-telling, re-writing, and re-calling—through a different skill—should be incorporated. The online Workbook that supports the printed module—under continual development by collaborating teachers—will be a useful tool to help meet these challenges. In addition, a finer calibration of level of difficulty of reading and listening materials is desirable. In 2024, the researchers plan to further adapt module content for lower-level classes using AI tools such as ChatGPT and Quillbot, creating multiple versions of passages to allow students to take upward steps into more complex prose as their understanding of the basic concepts is consolidated. Finally, a significant obstacle to CLIL-based learning identified by the researchers-curriculum designers is the significant gaps in students’ NGSL (New General Service List) vocabulary, which comprises 2,800 of the most commonly used words in English (Wadden, Onoda, Van Amelsvoort, Toyama, et al., 2023). This topic is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but the researchers-curriculum designers hope in 2024 to strengthen students’ underlying vocabulary foundation through an NGSL vocabulary surge during the first term of study.

Universities and English programs wishing to adopt a similar reform face the same challenges discussed in detail above. In addition, there are two further major hurdles: institutional and educational. The first is that a university must be willing to devote time and resources—faculty and funds—to create an effective English program. This means supporting multiple-class meetings a week, effectively allocating those courses among teachers (such as two teachers sharing 4 *koma*), and employing full-time rather than part-time instructors, so teachers can fully focus attention on the students and curriculum. Universities must also be willing to stream students according to English-language level—which allows for language instruction in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978)—and maintain class sizes of 12 to 20 students to permit optimal teacher-student interaction. The second hurdle involves the development of suitable CLIL materials that reflect either liberal arts content or the academic subject fields of a given faculty; few, if any, commercially published texts are available for this purpose. If the students have a wide range of language ability, two or more versions of the instructional materials may need to be created.

The researchers-curriculum designers hope that by the end of 2024 their course materials and liberal arts content will be ready for wider distribution to similar English programs throughout Japan. This may take the form of coursebook publication with a Japanese or international publisher, publication through an online language-teaching



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organization such as English Central, making materials available (and adaptable) through a platform such as Google Drive, or publication-distribution through a nation-wide consortium such as that now being established by ETS-Japan.

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Bio Data

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Sophie Otsuru earned an MSc in Psychology of Language from Edinburgh University. Her research interests include Cognitive Linguistics, the use of prepositions by native and non-native speakers of a language as well as Second Language Acquisition in general. She currently works at Juntendo University. Prior to coming to Japan, she taught English

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