

Precision and Trust in Team-Taught CLIL: Building Effective Teaching Partnerships

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This study investigated how Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) implementation affects collaboration between Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in secondary schools. Drawing on data from two contrasting school settings, the study explores how CLIL adoption transforms team teaching relationships. Data from questionnaires, interviews, and field notes reveal that while CLIL implementation initially increased demands on collaborative planning, it ultimately led to more efficient team-teaching practices and helped teachers move beyond traditional role limitations. The findings highlight the critical interplay between precision and trust in building effective teaching partnerships, while also revealing persistent systemic barriers, particularly regarding time for collaborative planning. The study suggests that team-taught CLIL, when supported with appropriate resources, can serve as a vehicle for building genuine communities of practice that benefit both teachers and students.

本研究は、内容言語統合学習 (CLIL) の導入が、中等教育における日本人英語教師 (JTE) と外国語指導助手 (ALT) の協働に与える影響を検討する。対照的なふたつの学校環境のデータをもとに、CLILの導入がチームティーチングの関係性をどのように変容させるかを探る。アンケート、インタビュー、フィールドノートのデータから明らかになったのは、CLIL導入は、当初協働的な授業計画への要求を高めたものの、最終的にはより効率的なチームティーチングの実践を実現し、教師が従来の役割を超えて成長するのを可能にしたことである。研究結果は、効果的な教師間パートナーシップにおける「正確性」と「信頼」の重要な相互作用を示すと同時に、協働的計画時間などの制度的な課題も明らかにした。本研究は、適切なリソースによって支援されるCLILを用いたチームティーチングが、教師と生徒の双方に利益をもたらす実践共同体を構築する手段となり得ることを示唆している。

Team teaching between Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) has been a cornerstone of English education in Japan since the 1987 launch of the JET Program. However, despite over three decades of implementation, significant challenges persist in achieving meaningful collaboration between team teachers. Research shows that up to 41% of team teachers report “no actual team teaching happening” despite being designated as team teachers (Walter & Sponseller, 2020, p. 29).

Role confusion and lack of collaborative planning time are frequently cited as major obstacles (Miyazato, 2009; Johannes, 2012). ALTs often find themselves relegated to “human tape recorder” roles, simply reading textbook dialogues (Yoshida et al., 2017; Borg, 2020), while JTEs struggle to meaningfully integrate ALTs into lessons due to time constraints and unclear expectations (Reed, 2016; Sponseller, 2017). This situation results in missed opportunities for both teachers’ professional development and students’ language learning.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers a potential framework for revitalizing team-teaching practices. By providing clear pedagogical principles and emphasizing both content and language learning (Coyle et al., 2010), CLIL could help define clearer roles for team teachers while providing meaningful contexts for collaboration. However, successful CLIL implementation requires sustained support and opportunities for teacher development (Sasajima, 2019).

This study proposes building communities of practice around CLIL as an avenue for enhancing team teaching collaboration. Communities of practice—groups of practitioners who share concerns and deepen their knowledge through regular interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—may provide the structured support needed for effective CLIL implementation while fostering meaningful collaboration between JTEs and ALTs. Through examining two contrasting cases of CLIL implementation, this research investigates how such communities might be built and sustained in Japanese secondary schools.

Background

Soft CLIL in Japan

While CLIL originated in Europe as a way to teach academic subjects through a foreign language (“Hard CLIL”), its implementation in Japan has taken a different form. “Soft CLIL,” where language teachers incorporate content into their language lessons, has emerged as the more feasible approach in the Japanese context (Ikeda et al., 2021). Unlike European countries where content specialists teach their subjects in English, Japanese schools typically lack teachers with sufficient language proficiency to conduct Hard CLIL lessons. Instead, Soft CLIL allows English teachers to enhance their language lessons with meaningful content while maintaining a focus on language development (Ikeda, 2013; Kavanagh, 2018).

Soft CLIL in Japan represents a bottom-up movement within English language education. Without explicit support from government policies, it has been left to practitioners at the local level to find ways to implement it (Morton, 2019). This grassroots nature makes team teaching between JTEs and ALTs a potentially valuable vehicle for CLIL implementation, as collaborative efforts can help bridge the gap between policy and practice (Sasajima, 2013, 2019; Ikeda, 2013; Lyster, 2018).

Collaborative Team Teaching

The success of Soft CLIL initiatives depends heavily on how well JTEs and ALTs can work together to develop and deliver content-rich language lessons. Two influential frameworks help illustrate the key factors that enable such collaboration.

Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018) conceptualize teacher collaboration through the interaction of two critical dimensions: precision and trust. Precision refers to the structures and tools that facilitate collaboration, such as regular planning meetings and feedback protocols, while trust represents collaborators’ beliefs in each other and in the benefits of collaboration for professional growth. According to their framework, when both dimensions are high, “collaborative professionalism” emerges—a state where collaborators can take risks, make mistakes, and have the tools to translate their partnership into effective practice.

Complementing this framework, Cushman (2013) identifies five essential factors for successful co-teaching: (1) shared pedagogical beliefs and coordinated planning through regular meetings, (2) creating a belief system where collaboration benefits both teachers professionally, (3) valuing individual differences as enriching both teachers’ and learners’

experiences, (4) individual accountability and clear role definitions to ensure equitable workload, and (5) willingness to compromise and take on additional responsibilities if necessary.

These theoretical foundations emphasize that successful collaboration requires both high precision (through protocols and tools) and high trust (through strong interpersonal relationships), while also attending to essential factors like shared goals, mutual accountability, and respect for individual differences. Building on these insights, the Team-Taught CLIL Project (“TTCLIL Project”) was developed to put these principles in practice.

The TTCLIL Project

The researcher conceived the TTCLIL Project as a more systematic approach to team teaching in Soft CLIL contexts. Recognizing that many team teachers lack models for effective collaboration (Borg, 2020; Miyazato, 2009), the project aimed to create communities of practice where teachers could develop their understanding of CLIL while improving their team-teaching practices.

The project began with the development of online training resources, including video modules explaining CLIL principles and demonstrating their application in team-taught lessons. A dedicated website served as a hub for these resources and included templates for collaborative lesson planning, feedback, and reflection. These tools were designed to help teachers integrate CLIL’s “4Cs” framework—Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture—into their team-teaching practice (Coyle et al., 2010).

Central to the project was the establishment of regular reflection meetings between participating teachers and a CLIL consultant (the researcher). These meetings provided opportunities for teachers to discuss their implementation challenges, receive feedback on their lessons, and collaboratively develop solutions. The project emphasized adaptive implementation (Henrichsen, 1989), recognizing that CLIL practices would need to be modified to suit different school contexts while maintaining core principles.

The project was also influenced by collaborative action research methodologies (Burns, 2013), with teachers actively involved in exploring and refining CLIL practices. This reflected the researcher’s underlying belief that sustainable educational change requires teachers to take an active role in developing pedagogical strategies tailored to their specific contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This research draws data from a larger study examining the conditions for successful adoption of team-taught Soft CLIL in Japanese secondary schools. The present study focuses specifically on whether and how collaborative practices improved as a result of participating in the TTCLIL Project.

Data Collection

Pre- and post-implementation questionnaires were distributed to all participating teachers via email. These questionnaires used 4-point Likert scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) to assess multiple dimensions of team teaching including lesson planning coordination, role clarity, reflection practices, and overall collaboration satisfaction. Both questionnaires also included open-response items that asked teachers about their challenges with collaboration as well as what they hoped to gain from (pre) or learned from (post) the TTCLIL Project.

Throughout the implementation period, detailed research notes and written reflective accounts were maintained for all meetings and interactions with each collaborative team. These field notes documented observations and interpretations of salient issues in the teachers' collaborative attempts to implement CLIL.

To gain deeper insights into individual perspectives, follow-up interviews were also conducted approximately 3-4 months after the completion of the final lessons. These interviews were conducted individually to ensure teachers could speak freely about collaboration issues they may not have felt comfortable discussing in front of their teaching partners. All interviews were video recorded, transcribed, and, where necessary, translated from Japanese to English and checked by a native Japanese-speaking colleague. The interview data was then coded and analyzed to triangulate findings from the questionnaires and field notes, facilitating a more nuanced interpretation of the changes in collaborative practices.

Participants and Setting

Two contrasting cases were selected to examine how the TTCLIL Project functioned in different contexts: Matsu Junior High School ("Matsu JHS") and Ume Junior High School ("Ume JHS").

Matsu JHS is a small rural school in Hokkaidō. The teaching pair consisted of Morita, a 46-year-old JTE with 23 years of teaching experience who had never studied abroad, and Benjamin, a 26-year-old American ALT in his fourth year of teaching. The pair had been team teaching together for three years and had developed a high level of trust, though they sometimes lacked precision in planning because of competing responsibilities at school.

For their project, Benjamin took on the roles of lesson planner and leader, while Morita, constrained by other school-related duties, focused on providing feedback and managing the lessons. They implemented the CLIL project in one of their two weekly English classes with a group of 14 third-year students. The project centered on student-created preference surveys exploring topics such as music, movies, and sports. After designing and distributing the surveys online, students analyzed the approximately 1,250 responses they received from participants across multiple countries. These responses then became the basis for class discussions, data interpretation activities, and final presentations. Though initially conceived as a 7-week unit, the project's success led to its extension to over 7 months and 27 lessons. Throughout this period, the researcher conducted 26 reflection and planning meetings with Benjamin and Morita via Zoom, totaling nearly 38 hours.

Ume JHS is a large public school in suburban Kansai. The teaching pair included Fujita, a female JTE in her 40s with more than 10 years of teaching experience, and Latoya, a 26-year-old American ALT in her third year of teaching. The pair had been team teaching for 14 months and had developed good rapport, though Fujita's busy schedule often made collaborative planning difficult.

For their project, Latoya was the lesson planner and leader, while Fujita, pressed for time by other school responsibilities, focused on managing the classroom. They implemented a 2-week Cultural Awareness unit with their special needs class of 4 students. The teacher-created unit was implemented over 4 lessons that engaged students in researching and creating presentations about different countries. The researcher held 7 reflection and planning meetings on Zoom with the team, totaling approximately 5 hours.

All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and anonymization of identifying information.

Results

Matsu JHS

The seven-month CLIL implementation at Matsu JHS revealed both opportunities and challenges in building a collaborative teaching practice. Pre- and post-implementation questionnaire responses showed that while both teachers maintained generally positive attitudes toward team teaching, their collaborative practices evolved in notable ways (see Table 1). Most significantly, post-lesson reflection practices improved substantially (Benjamin: 2→4; Morita: 2→3), even as lesson planning coordination showed slight decreases (Benjamin: 3→2; Morita: 4→3) due to time constraints.

Table 1

Matsu JHS Pre- and Post-Implementation Questionnaire Responses

Item	Pre		Post	
	Benjamin	Morita	Benjamin	Morita
1. I enjoy team teaching.	3	4	3	3
2. We go over the lesson plan before class.	3	4	2	3
3. We know our roles for activities before class.	3	3	2	3
4. We reflect on lessons after class.	2	2	4	3
5. Learning to use CLIL was easy for me.	NA	NA	2	3
6. The TTCLIL website provided helpful examples and guidelines for CLIL.	NA	NA	IDK	3
7. I felt supported in my efforts to implement CLIL.	NA	NA	4	4

Note: 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Agree; 4=Strongly agree; IDK=I Don't Know; NA=Not Available

Pre- and post-implementation questionnaire results revealed an interesting pattern in the evolution of their collaborative practice. While both teachers' overall enjoyment of team teaching remained relatively stable (Benjamin: 3; Morita: 4→3), there was a

notable decline in their assessment of role clarity (Benjamin: 3→2; Morita: 3) and lesson planning coordination. This apparent decline, however, needs to be interpreted in light of Benjamin's interview comments about elevated expectations: "With normal classes, we don't necessarily have to go over the lesson plan or know our roles... With CLIL, the expectation was there." This suggests that the lower ratings may reflect increased awareness of collaboration quality rather than actual deterioration in practice.

Although both teachers found CLIL implementation challenging initially, they reported feeling well-supported throughout the process (both rating 4). In follow-up interviews, Benjamin characterized the experience as "ideal on-the-job training" while Morita noted significant improvement in the ALT's teaching ability. The latter observation suggests the potential for CLIL to serve as a professional development framework.

The interview data further clarified how the CLIL framework affected their team-teaching dynamic. Benjamin noted that framing lessons explicitly as "CLIL classes" changed student attitudes toward challenging content, with students describing activities as "challenging but fun" rather than simply "too hard," as they would in their normal English lessons. This distinction proved valuable for implementation, as it created a separate space where both teachers could experiment with the more demanding content. The benefits of this experimentation were evident in their subsequent CLIL project with second-year students, which Morita noted they completed in "only three or four hours of class time" due to their enhanced precision with the process.

Time emerged as the primary challenge, particularly in securing adequate meeting opportunities. As Benjamin explained in his interview: "Between my traveling between five different schools, eating lunch with kids, preparing for other lessons... it was almost impossible to complete CLIL lesson planning within working hours." Despite these constraints, both teachers found value in the structured collaboration. Morita observed that "classes when we had sufficient meetings were quite different from those when we did not," again highlighting the importance of precision in collaborative planning.

Notably, the experience appeared to shift perceptions of the ALT's role. Morita reflected that the project demonstrated how ALTs who understand pedagogical processes like scaffolding could contribute more substantially to student learning beyond traditional game-focused activities. This suggests that CLIL implementation can help evolve team teaching relationships beyond the "human tape recorder" dynamic noted in the previously cited research.

These findings suggest that while CLIL implementation initially increased demands on collaborative planning, it ultimately led to more efficient and effective team-teaching practices. The framework provided what Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) would characterize as increased precision in collaboration, even as it benefited from the pre-existing trust between the teaching pair. Overall, this combination of high trust and growing precision appears to have enabled sustainable improvement in their team-teaching practice.

Ume JHS

At Ume JHS, despite the shorter implementation period, data revealed more dramatic improvements in collaborative practices. The questionnaire results (Table 2) showed substantial increases in the JTE's evaluation of team-teaching enjoyment (3→4), lesson planning coordination (2→4), and reflection practices (2→4). The ALT maintained consistently high ratings for team teaching enjoyment (4) and showed improved role clarity (3→4), though reflection practices remained an area for growth (1→2).

Table 2

Ume JHS Pre- and Post-Implementation Questionnaire Responses

Item	Pre		Post	
	Latoya	Fujita	Latoya	Fujita
1. I enjoy team teaching.	4	3	4	4
2. We go over the lesson plan before class.	2	2	3	4
3. We know our roles for activities before class.	3	1	4	3
4. We reflect on lessons after class.	1	2	2	4
5. Learning to use CLIL was easy for me.	NA	NA	4	IDK
6. The TTCLIL website provided helpful examples and guidelines for CLIL.	NA	NA	3	3
7. I felt supported in my efforts to implement CLIL.	NA	NA	4	3

Note. 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Agree; 4=Strongly agree; IDK=I Don't Know; NA=Not Available

While both teachers found the TTCLIL website helpful (both rating 3) and felt supported during implementation (Latoya: 4; Fujita: 3), their experiences with CLIL differed notably. The ALT found it relatively easy to learn (4) and reported that CLIL “introduced new concepts that I will now incorporate into my teaching.” The JTE, however, expressed uncertainty about the learning process, citing time constraints as a significant barrier: “I don't have time to learn what to do when I'm busy.”

The division of labor during implementation reflected common challenges in team teaching, with the ALT taking on most planning and leadership responsibilities while the JTE focused on classroom management and feedback. In follow-up interviews, Fujita expressed gratitude but also guilt about this arrangement: “I was so thankful to [Latoya] for doing basically everything because I didn't have time to prepare and meet.” This dynamic underscores the persistent challenge of achieving balanced collaboration within existing institutional constraints.

With regards to sustainability, the teaching pair's experiences revealed both opportunities and limitations. While Latoya expressed interest in expanding CLIL implementation to first-year students, Fujita noted that curriculum standardization requirements would make this difficult. This tension between innovation and institutional constraints echoes broader challenges in implementing team-taught CLIL in Japanese secondary schools, suggesting that while short-term implementation can yield significant improvements in collaboration, sustainable integration requires addressing systemic barriers to teacher coordination and innovation.

Discussion

The experiences of both teaching pairs reveal key factors in building communities of practice around team-taught CLIL, while also highlighting persistent challenges in Japanese secondary schools. In terms of Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) framework, at Matsu JHS, where pre-existing trust was high, the CLIL framework helped increase precision through structured planning and reflection processes. At Ume JHS, despite high initial trust, limited time for collaboration hindered the development of precision, suggesting that both dimensions must be actively sustained for meaningful change to occur.

These cases also demonstrate how CLIL implementation can address the “human tape recorder” phenomenon noted in previous research (Yoshida et al., 2017; Borg, 2020). Both ALTs moved beyond traditional roles to take on more substantive instructional responsibilities, while JTEs recognized their potential for deeper pedagogical

contributions. This evolution aligns with Cushman's (2013) emphasis on valuing individual differences and creating mutual professional benefits through collaboration.

The contrasting implementation periods—seven months at Matsu JHS versus two weeks at Ume JHS—reveal important insights about sustainability. While short-term implementation can produce dramatic improvements in collaborative practices, as seen at Ume JHS, the Matsu JHS case suggests that longer-term engagement allows for the development of more efficient and adaptive collaborative routines. This finding supports Sasajima's (2019) assertion that successful CLIL implementation requires sustained support and opportunities for teacher development. The efficiency gains noted in Matsu JHS's subsequent CLIL project particularly demonstrate how communities of practice can evolve over time.

While securing adequate meeting time remains a persistent challenge in JTE–ALT collaboration (Reed, 2016; Sponseller, 2017), this study suggests that structured support through online resources and regular consultation can help teachers work within these constraints. The combination of digital tools and human support provided a systematic framework for collaboration while maintaining the practitioner-led approach that characterizes Soft CLIL implementation in Japan (Morton, 2019).

Importantly, both cases demonstrate how communities of practice can emerge even within institutional constraints, supporting Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualization of professional learning through structured interaction. However, the challenges faced by both pairs—particularly around meeting time and workload distribution—suggest that building sustainable communities of practice requires schools to confront logistical and systemic challenges head-on. The tension between innovation and institutional requirements, most evident in Ume JHS's inability to expand CLIL implementation due to curriculum standardization, highlights the need for greater institutional support for collaborative teaching initiatives.

Practical Implications

To achieve a community of practice where team teachers work together in an effective manner, there are several factors that should be considered. Drawing from Cushman (2013) and the findings of this study, the following essential factors emerged for building successful communities of practice around team-taught CLIL:

First, teachers must share the belief that CLIL principles align with best educational practices. They must agree that what they are attempting to do is put those principles

into practice. The results showed both schools' teachers found value in CLIL principles and successfully integrated them despite different contexts.

Second, team teachers must agree to implement CLIL and plan and coordinate together through at least semi-regular meetings. Good communication is vital, and dedicated time for collaboration directly impacts implementation quality. While both schools showed initial improvements in collaborative practices, sustained success correlated strongly with protected meeting time.

Third, teachers should value their individual differences as enriching both teachers' and learners' experiences. The improved role clarity scores demonstrated how CLIL can provide a framework for leveraging JTE–ALT complementary strengths. At Matsu JHS, this manifested in the ALT's development of scaffolding skills and the JTE's recognition of the expanding pedagogical contributions in the ALT's role for Soft CLIL.

Fourth, collaborating teachers should maintain CLIL principles while remaining flexible enough to learn and adapt together. The research revealed that successful implementation requires viewing CLIL as a collaborative learning process—team *learning* CLIL—rather than simply team teaching.

Fifth, teachers must uphold their individual responsibilities and hold one another accountable to their agreed upon roles. This accountability is essential to ensure neither teacher perceives a situation of unequal labor distribution. Regular reflection meetings and specific role allocations help maintain this balance.

Given these factors, team teaching can effectively support Soft CLIL implementation in Japanese secondary schools when backed by adequate support for collaborative planning and professional development.

Limitations and Future Research

The scope and design of this study presents limitations for interpreting its findings. First, the small sample size of two teaching pairs limits the generalizability of results. Variability in teacher backgrounds and relationships, such as the pre-existing rapport between teachers, also complicates the ability to isolate the effects of the TTCLIL Project itself. Furthermore, the researcher's dual role as both CLIL consultant and researcher may have also influenced participants' reported experiences and satisfaction with the project. Finally, as the findings are rooted in the specific context of Japanese secondary schools, their applicability to other educational systems may be limited.

Future research should examine CLIL implementation across a broader range of

school contexts and teaching pairs, particularly investigating cases where JTEs take primary planning responsibility. Longitudinal studies tracking multiple cycles of CLIL implementation would help clarify how communities of practice evolve over time and identify factors contributing to long-term sustainability. Furthermore, research incorporating student learning outcomes would provide valuable insights into how different models of team-taught CLIL impact language development and content learning.

Conclusion

This study examined how communities of practice could be built around team-taught CLIL to enhance collaboration between JTEs and ALTs in Japanese secondary schools. Through analysis of two contrasting cases, the research revealed both the potential and challenges of using CLIL as a framework for developing more meaningful team-teaching practices. At both schools, despite differing implementation periods and contexts, the CLIL framework helped teachers move beyond traditional role limitations toward more substantive collaboration, supporting previous research suggesting CLIL's potential for revitalizing team-teaching practices.

The findings highlight the critical interplay between precision and trust in building effective teaching partnerships, while also revealing persistent systemic barriers—particularly regarding time for collaborative planning—that must be addressed for sustainable implementation. With CLIL-type education gaining momentum in Japan, the TTCLIL Project offers a structured framework to enhance team teaching through coordinated collaboration and ongoing professional development.

Ultimately, this research suggests that when provided with appropriate support and resources, team-taught CLIL can serve as more than just an instructional approach—it can become a vehicle for building genuine communities of practice that benefit both teachers and students. However, realizing this potential will require greater institutional recognition of and support for the collaborative processes that underpin successful team teaching.

Bio Data

Nate Olson is an assistant professor at Toyo Gakuen University in Tokyo. He holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Sophia University. His research interests include CLIL, PBL, team teaching, teacher development, and communities of practice.

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