



Adopting CLIL in Japan: An In-depth University Case Study

Robert Dilenschneider

Jichi Medical University

Paul Wadden

Juntendo University

Hiroaki Umehara

Juntendo University

Saran Shiroza

International Christian University

Chris Carl Hale

Akita International University

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CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) combines the learning of language with academic content to build English proficiency skills while fostering communication, critical thinking,

and cultural understanding. This in-depth case study presents the creation and outcomes of a CLIL curriculum that was implemented within the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Juntendo University, Tokyo. With the aims of improving academic English skills, boosting TOEFL scores, and preparing students for English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, this project constructed texts that combined vocabulary, reading, and listening activities through the learning of liberal arts topics. The quantitative results of the CLIL curriculum indicate significant improvements in TOEFL ITP scores; the findings from student surveys show fairly high levels of student satisfaction. Overall, this study confirms CLIL's efficacy of simultaneously learning language and content and provides an extended example of how Japanese universities can enhance English proficiency while improving academic skills to prepare students for further university study and their future careers.

CLIL (内容言語統合型学習)は、言語学習と学術的内容の習得を統合し、英語力を向上させるとともに、コミュニケーション能力、批判的思考力、異文化理解を育む教育アプローチである。本研究は、順天堂大学国際教養学部において実施されたCLILカリキュラムの開発とその成果を扱った詳細な事例研究である。本プロジェクトでは、アカデミック英語能力の向上、TOEFLスコアの改善、英語による授業(EMI)への備えを目的として、語彙・読解・リスニング活動を教養科目の学習に組み込んだ教材を構築した。その結果、TOEFL ITPスコアにおいて顕著な向上が定量的に確認され、また学生アンケート調査の結果からは高い満足度が示された。総じて、本研究は、言語と内容を同時に学ぶCLILの有効性を確認するとともに、日本の大学において、学生の英語力と学術的スキルを同時に伸ばし、さらなる大学教育や将来のキャリアに備えるための実践例を提示するものである。

Content Language and Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a pedagogical methodology of learning a foreign language through focused study of academic subjects. As described by Marsh in 1994 when he coined the term, CLIL specifically involves teaching academic subjects through a foreign language to cultivate and acquire language skills while learning content. Smit and Dafouz state, “Learners are engaged in a joint learning practice of subject matter and foreign language” (2012, p. 1). This approach requires integrative tasks and activities for students to concurrently increase their understanding of subject material while developing their proficiency in a second language. As such, CLIL not only nurtures linguistic abilities and cultivates the acquisition of academic knowledge but also trains learners with skills vital for future academic and professional success.

Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) elaborate that CLIL implements an interactive approach of learning both subject matter and language by using a 4Cs framework of content, cognition, communication, and culture. For example, CLIL emphasizes students studying content to allow them to better understand specific knowledge areas while developing their language skills. It promotes cognition by teaching critical thinking and learning approaches to widen understanding and sharpen problem-solving abilities. It fosters communication by having students apply their foreign language skills effectively through the practical use of a second language. Lastly, Coyle, Hood, and Marsh explain that CLIL promotes cultural understanding by educating learners through an overarching variety of social and global issues to prepare them for living in a diverse world.

More specific explorations and explanations of CLIL in Europe can be found in de Zarobe and Catalan's (2009) volume *Content and Language Integrated Learning: Evidence from Research in Europe*, and in Asia in Sim and Kim's (2016) report on a particular CLIL program in Korea. In Japan, Wadden's (2021) "Liberal Arts, First-year English, and TOEFL: an Illustrative Case for Curricular Reform at Japanese Universities" discusses CLIL and liberal arts learning in the context of Japanese higher education, which provides the basis for the reform described in this article.

Background

Educators do not work in isolation; they employ their teaching methodologies in concert with the institutional goals of an academic institution and the aims of governmental educational agencies, which leads to several challenges. First, to motivate students to study academic English, educators must create collaborative and appropriate learning environments that both stimulate and address learners at different levels of language proficiency. Second, educators must teach skills related to critical thinking, cultural adaptability, and academic writing. Third, to demonstrate academic competency and language proficiency, at many institutions educators are required to help students achieve target scores on standardized tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS. Finally, these challenges should also, if possible, align with top-down curricular reform outcomes such as Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiatives. This means educators face a challenge in balancing language instruction and content to meet students' needs while satisfying national and institutional standards.

Meeting these challenges is becoming particularly urgent in the face of rapidly changing educational contexts in Japan. Aligning with the global trend of

internationalization of higher education, MEXT and its affiliate organization JSPS have introduced various initiatives, such as the Global 30 Project [2009-2014] (MEXT, 2017), the Inter-University Exchange Project [2011-] (JSPS, n.d.), the Top Global University Project [2014-2023] (MEXT, 2020), and the Multicultural Campus Project toward Social Impact [2024-] (JSPS, 2024) to promote curricular innovations for global citizenship education (Brown & Bradford, 2019), to foster international educational exchange, and to internationalize Japanese universities. Central to such curricular shifts is the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI), including the introduction of English-taught degree programs. Currently, more than 40% of Japanese universities are offering specialist content courses in English, and EMI degree programs are also on the rise (MEXT, 2024). The renewed emphasis on English is also in line with an emerging trend to adopt liberal arts curricula in Japanese universities. Kurihara (2018) notes that the number of university departments named with "liberal arts" (or its Japanese equivalent *Kyoyo*) has increased since around 2000. A recent survey by Japan University Accreditation Association (2023) found that liberal arts education is promoted in 374 out of 787 target Japanese universities, the majority initiating such efforts in the past ten years, to help students develop global competencies. At these and other universities, the TOEFL ITP is often used as a benchmark to assess student performance. Educational Testing Service (ETS), which makes and distributes the TOEFL and TOEIC tests, reports that 153 universities in Japan now use the TOEFL ITP for a wide range of purposes including entrance, placement, performance assessment, pre/post testing, overseas programs, and additional purposes (Educational Testing Service, 2023). The apparently instrumental goal of increasing TOEFL ITP scores is therefore actually entwined in the broader policy orientation toward the internationalization of higher education.

In this context, this research project—supported by a JSPS grant—aimed to produce measurable outcomes at a particular university within the four-year grant period, potentially providing a successful case study of integrating liberal arts and English language education. This meant addressing several focal challenges specific to the research context. One was to develop a level-adaptable CLIL curriculum to meet the needs of incoming students with varying degrees of English proficiency so that they could be introduced, through accessible language, to traditional fields of the liberal arts, and the concomitant ways of thinking associated with them, which tend to be unfamiliar to most Japanese college entrants (Nanni & Hale, 2020; Hale 2015, Marginson, 2011). In addition, an institutional goal of implementing more EMI courses required overall improvement in students' academic readiness to enable them to succeed in newly implemented classes. The TOEFL benchmark was closely watched to gauge the overall results of curricular reforms,

and TOEFL scores of individual students were used as benchmarks to access newly implemented EMI courses and English language two-year, upper-level seminars.

Education in liberal arts is often overlooked in Japanese high school and college curricula despite its significance in the academic background that higher level university study in English and EMI programs presuppose. In Japan, students at the typical high school must choose between two tracks: the humanities (*bunkei* 文系) or science (*riki* 理系). Freshman students at Japanese universities therefore lack some of the foundational knowledge of concepts and terminology in the traditional disciplines of liberal arts for either humanities or natural sciences, depending on which track they previously chose to study. In addition, there are few high school courses in the social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and social psychology. Table 1, for example, reveals a breakdown analysis of topics and their percentage of appearance in the reading sections 10 ITP tests (Wadden et al, 2001).

Table 1
TOEFL topics listed by descending frequency and percentage of appearance

TOEFL Topics	Percentage
Natural Science [Zoology, Health and Medicine, Geology, Astronomy etc.]	38%
History [Canadian and US History, Literature, Art, Music]	32%
Biography [Historical Figures, Scientists, Musicians, Writers]	16%
Social Science [Sociology, Social Psychology, Economics, etc.]	12%
General Interest	2%

Familiarity with basic concepts across the fields of the liberal arts is one key to higher performance on the TOEFL. The executive director of TOEFL at ETS observes, “Most of the 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” (Gobal as quoted in Moody, 2020). The fact that Japanese university students perform more poorly on TOEFL than most of their Asian counterparts (MEXT, 2021) represents one sign of their need for liberal arts-themed curricula that integrate intensive language instruction.

Against this backdrop, this project endeavored to establish an innovative CLIL curriculum that simultaneously enhances students’ English proficiency and academic readiness for college-level education delivered through the medium of English. The effectiveness of the curriculum was objectively verified by the increase in the TOEFL ITP scores, an established indicator for the preparedness for English-medium liberal arts college education. At its conclusion in 2025, the project will share its curriculum materials and design with other Japanese universities, especially those struggling to improve their students’ academic English proficiency. Such a collaborative approach will provide a scalable solution that not only addresses the global trends but also serves the local needs in pedagogical development. This article is one step in that process.

The CLIL Curriculum Project

Participants, Classes and Curriculum

The CLIL curriculum implemented as a case study in the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Juntendo University in Tokyo began in 2022 with 240 first-year students who were part of an experimental pilot group. Initially the English curriculum consisted of 4-*koma* (90-minute classes) per week. In 2023, however, to increase its intensity the number of classes was increased to 5-*koma* and then to 6-*koma* in 2024. The program curriculum was unified in that its content-based materials and content-based tests were shared and integrated across all first-year English courses. This methodology was designed to help students develop their academic English proficiency while ensuring consistent learning outcomes. The overall goal of the project was to create an effective model for teaching both language and content, establishing the basis for a curriculum that could be further enhanced and expanded, both at its home institution and at other universities with similar needs.

The Modules

The knowledge areas for CLIL study were based on five fields of liberal arts and a sixth closely related to the founding academic discipline of the university: a medical school established in 1838. The fields are Sociology, Economics, Earth Science, Zoology, Natural History, and Health and Medicine. Teaching modules—instructional texts in each knowledge area—follow a five-step structured methodology that integrates language learning skills with subject content. The modules begin with an “activating” exercise consisting of questions designed to help students recall, generate, and share their existing knowledge and interest in a topic. Second, a *subject-specific vocabulary*

component of the module introduces students to the specialized terminology that they will encounter in learning about that particular field. Third, the reading activity component of the module entitled *Reading for Knowledge* is presented to help develop lexical and schematic knowledge of a field by engaging in-depth content matter while strengthening their understanding of content-related words, terms and phrases. Fourth, parallel to the reading module, a listening module extends the topics, vocabulary, and concepts in the readings and introduces some new ones (see below for a more specific description). Last, the module concludes with a test component to examine students' acquisition of content knowledge and language skills emphasized in the module text. Together, the sequence of the five components in the modules not only methodically helps students learn content knowledge but also gradually enables them to more confidently use new language skills related to the topic.

Overview of the Reading Module and Activities

The Reading for Knowledge passages provide an introduction to each knowledge area in addition to related subject matter, are roughly the same length as typical TOEFL passages, and include exercises with similar questions. The initial three readings form the knowledge core: the first describes the academic field, the subfields within it, and the questions that researchers (and university courses) in the field explore. The next two readings introduce principal topics in the field, such as in Earth Science, earthquakes and volcanoes. All classes cover these three passages with students highlighting and annotating key information, and the content test assesses students' understanding of the central concepts. About ten additional reading passages are also included in the reading module on more illustrative and specific topics such as, in Earth Science, The Great Kanto Earthquake, The Eruption of Mt. St. Helens, The Biggest Earthquake Ever Recorded, the Formation of Mt. Everest, the Process of Identifying Minerals, the Formation and Extraction of Oil, Geomorphology, How Diamonds are Created, Ocean Warming, and the Geologist and Volcanologist Haroun Tazieff. Depending upon their class level, students read some or all these additional passages. Several of the passages appear in two versions which the instructor can choose from: one written at a CEFR A2 and the other at a CEFR B1 level. To have students gain a basic orientation of a reading passage, they are taught to "strategically read" academic texts more than a few paragraphs long by reading the introductory paragraph, scanning the initial sentences of the body paragraphs, and then returning to the beginning of the passage and reading it from the start to end. This allows them to create a mental framework of the passage and more easily grasp the supporting points and illustrative examples. Passages are followed

by a variety of learning activities to help students better understand the structure of written academic English by identifying topic sentences, answering comprehension questions, and making conceptual maps of the content presented. After some of the readings, short-answer questions are also used to assess content acquisition and practice writing, requiring students to notice passage structure and write concise responses that demonstrate their understanding of the material. Quizlet flashcards with bilingual translations reinforce the list of subject-specific terms at the beginning of the module, allowing for active recall and reinforcement. This is complemented by an appendix in which the core three passages are rendered in Japanese adjacent to English. In this way students who are unsure of their comprehension can confirm and solidify their grasp on the content before or while critically engaging with the text.

Overview of Listening Activities

In 2022 and 2023, the liberal arts modules contained both reading and listening passages under the pedagogical premise that students initially were exposed to each knowledge area through reading and initial vocabulary study and subsequently their knowledge and language skills were reinforced and expanded through lecture content. In 2024, however, the listening materials and skills activities were significantly expanded, and systematic grammar study was added. The combined materials—more than 100 pages in length—became too long for the university printing office to include in one booklet each month, and so an independent listening module was introduced.

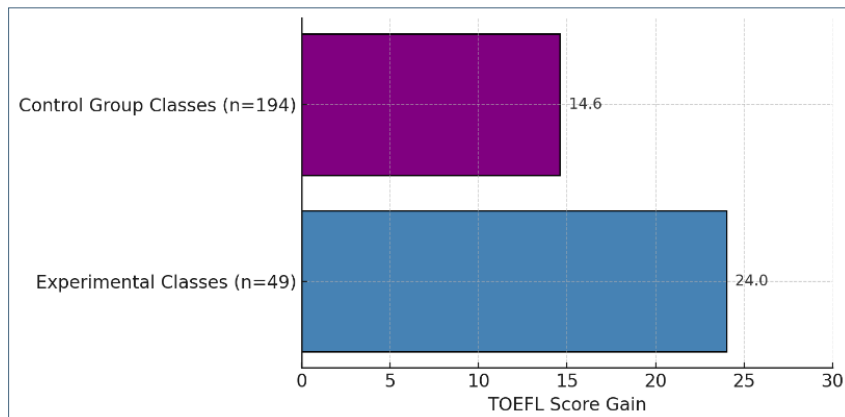
Listening modules begin with a series of warm-up discussion questions related to module content to activate knowledge and curiosity about the topic. A series of grammar explanations and exercises follow, ranging from time and emphasis markers in lectures to count and non-count nouns. These draw on and anticipate lecture content. Brief lecture excerpts introduce the rhetorical form of the academic talk and show how lecturers, for example, commonly introduce their topic, preview the lecture, define terms, and structure the content in supporting parts. A series of lectures that complement the readings follow, interspersed with a variety of activities to cultivate listening skills, vocabulary knowledge, and content understanding. These include note-taking practice, comprehension questions, and dictation exercises, among other activities. Since education in the university (and the listening section of the TOEFL ITP) also includes many class-related conversations, the listening module also offers additional conversations and discussions about module topics between students as well as related grammar and vocabulary exercises. For example, the Health and Medicine listening module includes conversations about back pain, the pro-/anti- vaccination debate, and

the topic of mental health. In addition, it concludes with a conversation between two students about stress and anxiety, a map of the campus showing where the Counselling Center is located, and the necessary information to make an appointment. Like its Reading Module counterpart, the Listening Module also includes appendices at the end with scripts and Japanese translations of the initial core passages so students can confirm their understanding in their native language.

Results

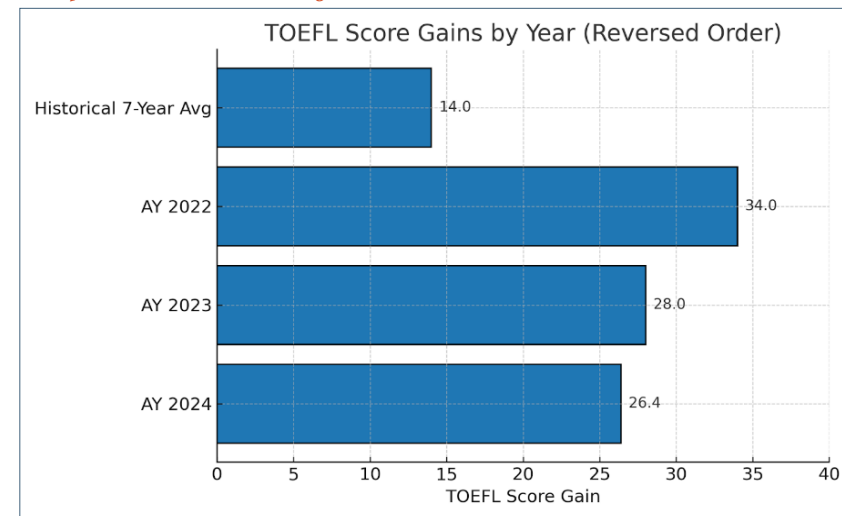
Results from the implementation of the CLIL curriculum involved evaluating measurable quantitative outcomes and the results of student satisfaction surveys, which have been reported in a succession of articles as they became available. See Wadden, Onoda, and Van Amelesvoort (2023); Wadden, Hale, Shiroza et al. (2024), and Wadden, Itoh, Park et al. (2025). Quantitative results based upon the English proficiency test scores of 16 classes provide a direct comparison of student performance. Each year the TOEFL ITP is administered to first-year students when they arrive in April and once again towards the end of their first-year study in late December. These scores helped assess the effectiveness of the CLIL approach in improving language proficiency and content knowledge. Figures 1 and 2 reveal the quantitative gains in language proficiency for TOEFL scores “Between Groups” in 2021 and “Over Years” in 2022, 2023, and 2024 respectively.

Figure 1
TOEFL Score Gains between Groups during the Initial Pilot Year (2021)



Note. 13 Control Group classes (N=194 students) = +14.6 point gain. 3 Experimental Group classes (N=49 students) = +24 point gain.

Figure 2
Average TOEFL Score Gains over Three Successive Years of Full Implementation in Comparison to 7-Year Average



Note. 7-Year Average Score Gain for Preceding 7 Years = +14. Score Gain Year 2022 = +34, Score Gain Year 2023 = +28, Score Gain Year 2024 = +26.4.

Overall, the 2022, 2023 and 2024 quantitative outcomes for the students who engaged with the CLIL modules revealed notable gains in TOEFL scores compared with the previous seven years, and results from t-tests for all three cohorts were significant. Results displayed in Figure 1, for example, indicate that students in the three Experimental Classes who engaged with the pilot versions of the CLIL modules achieved a 24-point gain in TOEFL performance compared with a 14.6 gain for students in the 13 Control Group classes who did not use the modules; this was a 74% higher performance. Likewise, results displayed in Figure 2 revealed students from the 2022, 2023, and 2024 classes studying in the new curriculum experienced a 34-point, 28-point, and 26.4 score gain in TOEFL ITP scores for a 140%, 107%, and 88.5% higher performance than the

14-point historical average over the seven years before the CLIL approach was adopted. It appears the CLIL curriculum had a notable positive impact in enhancing students' academic language proficiency and t-test scores with p-values of .001 confirm that these differences were statistically significant for all three cohorts.

Table 2

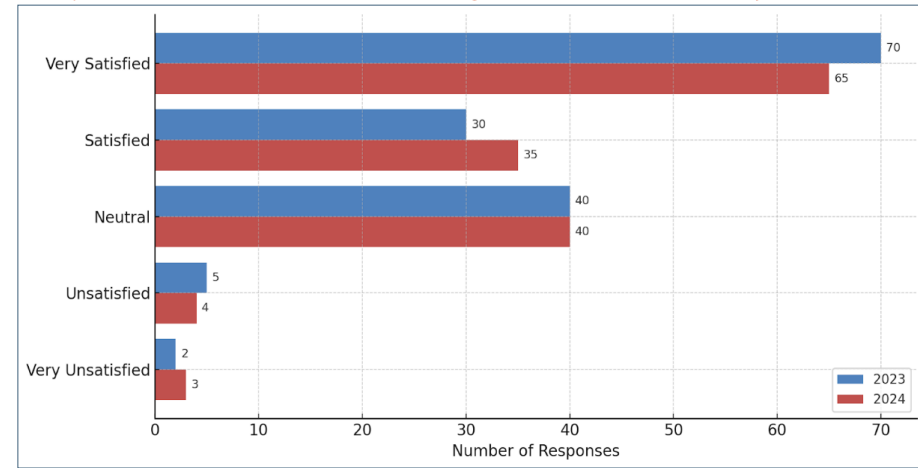
Descriptive Statistics for Figure 2. Average TOEFL Score Gains over Three Successive Years of Full Implementation

	Year		
	2022 (N=227)	2023 (N=220)	2024 (N=227)
Mean	33.68	28.71	26.37
SD	29.54	33.72	33.40
Min	-40	-73	-80
Max	116	113	113
T	9.40	9.40	5.58
p <	.001	.001	.001

Follow-up insights were also provided through student surveys, which explored learners' experiences, perceptions, and feedback on the CLIL curriculum. These are noteworthy because in planning the curriculum some faculty were skeptical about the value and effectiveness of CLIL in general and liberal arts in particular in a language class; some also claimed that such subjects are too difficult for students. The 2023 survey was created by one of the teachers involved in the curriculum reform and a member of the Kakenhi research project, and the 2024 survey was modeled after the first and created by the lead investigator. Students' opinions concerning the Classroom Atmosphere and Instructor's Approach in 2023 and 2024 are revealed in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

Figure 3

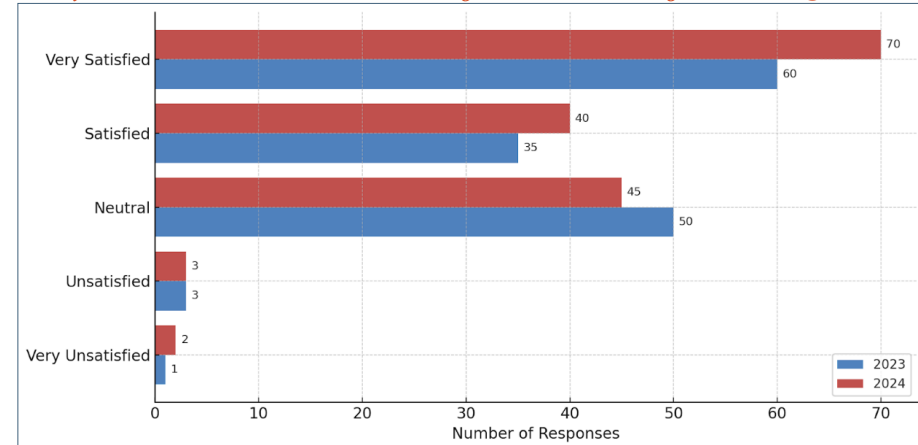
Survey Results 2023 and 2024. Your Thoughts on Classroom Atmosphere



Note. N = 149 for 2023 and N = 160 for 2024.

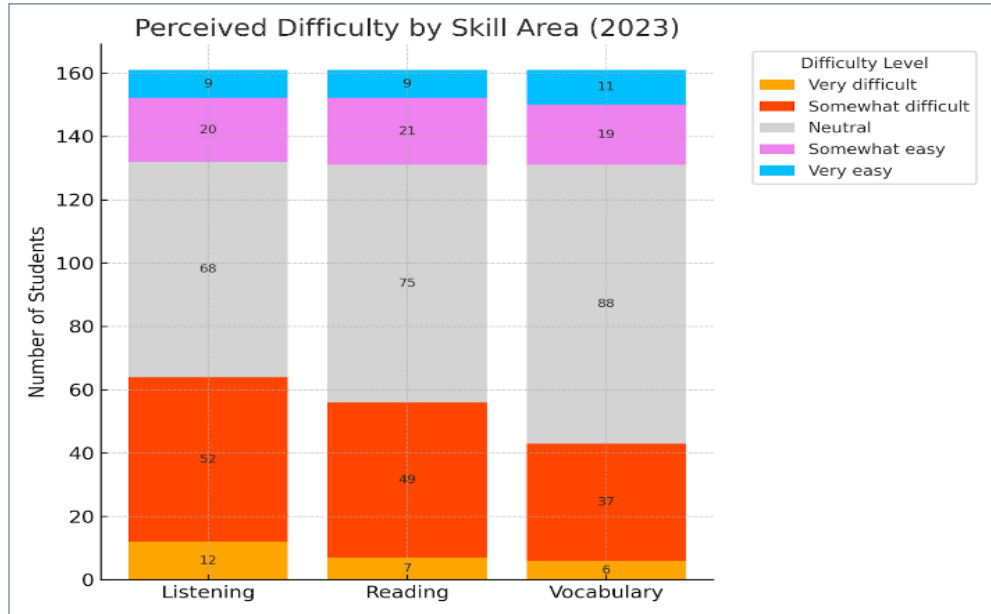
Figure 4

Survey Results 2023 and 2024: Your Thoughts on the Learning Materials (Question 2)



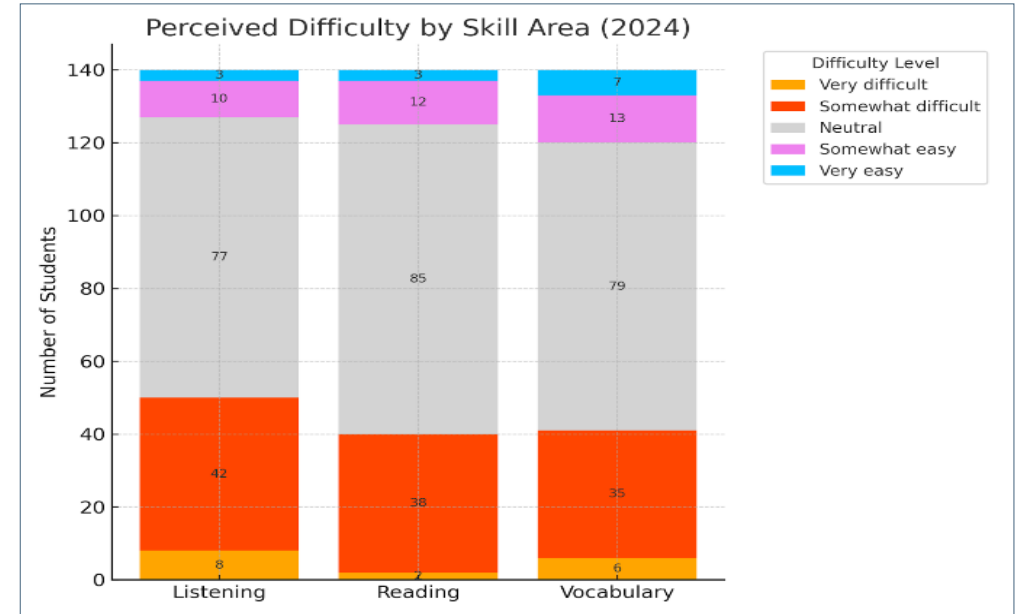
Note. N = 149 for 2023 and N = 160 for 2024.

Figure 5
Survey Results 2023: Perceived Difficulty by Skill Area (Question 3)



Note. N=149.

Figure 6
Survey Results 2024: Perceived Difficulty by Skill Area (Question 3)



Note. N=160.

Overall, as seen in the graph for Question 2, most students surveyed reported positive opinions concerning the classroom atmosphere and learning materials when engaging in the CLIL curriculum. The Satisfaction Survey Question 3 results indicate that the topics and the levels of the modules were regarded by majority of students as being “neutral” or “slightly difficult,” suggesting the reading, listening, and vocabulary materials were within Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, refuting faculty who regard CLIL or liberal arts content as inherently too difficult for first-year students. As measured by Cronbach’s alpha, the three sub-questions used to indicate estimated difficulty had a consistency of .812. Together, the feedback from both the quantitative and self-reported satisfaction data offers a deeper understanding of how a CLIL curriculum potentially impacts academic engagement and language development and provides informative data concerning students’ attitudes toward the integration of content and language learning.

Conclusion

The CLIL methodology of language learning through learning content not only helps enhance students' linguistic abilities and content understanding but can also, when coupled with teaching approaches traditionally associated with a liberal arts education, simultaneously help them develop academic English skills. This in-depth case study has shown how Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) modules can be created and implemented to address the challenges educators encounter to improve students' English proficiency.

The modules made for this case-study combined vocabulary acquisition with reading and listening activities and were structured to teach both language proficiency and subject knowledge to foster comprehensive language experience. As seen by the significant improvement in TOEFL scores from students over the three years from the curricular innovation, the applying of language skills to learn content knowledge was effective. Furthermore, the results from this case-study have shown that CLIL offers a powerful methodology to help students improve their performance on international assessments such as the TOEFL, and by inference, their preparation to meet the demands of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programs. For these reasons, the materials developed in the 4-year curriculum project have been made available for other educators to access and to adapt to fit their own contexts: <https://accentsasia.org/resources>

As Japan continues to struggle near the bottom of international English-language proficiency benchmarks, currently standing at 92nd out of 116 countries (EF Proficiency Index, 2024), a radical re-envisioning of how English is taught is required. While ambitious from the outset, this MEXT-supported curriculum-design project has attempted to directly address this issue. It now offers insight into how educators might utilize CLIL-based methodology in their language programs to improve language acquisition through content learning, paving the way for further research that might explore and refine the use of CLIL in higher education. The ability to teach content through a foreign language will likely become increasingly important as colleges and universities around the world become more internationalized.

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“Addressing Japan’s International TOEFL Ranking with an ‘English for Liberal Arts’ Curricular Model for Colleges and Universities” (21K00714).

Bio Data

Robert Dilenschneider, Ed.D., is an associate professor in the General Education Department at Jichi Medical University and teaches medical English (ESP) to students studying to become doctors for rural districts throughout Japan. He has taught ESL for over 28 years, served as the Publications Chair and an editor for the JALT Study Abroad Special Interest Group and has published and is active in the fields of computer assisted language learning and vocabulary acquisition.

Paul Wadden, Ph.D., is a special project professor in the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Juntendo University. He is the editor of *A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities* (Oxford, 1993) and, with Chris Carl Hale, *Teaching English at Japanese Universities: A New Handbook* (Routledge, 2019). His articles have appeared in *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal*, *RELC Journal*, *Composition Studies*, and many other publications.

Hiroaki Umehara earned an M.A. in Applied Linguistics from Texas Tech University. He currently teaches in the Faculty of International Liberal Arts at Juntendo University. His research interests focus on developing grammar and vocabulary teaching materials for EFL learners. Additionally, he is the founder of a non-profit organization dedicated to community development. His work in community design emphasizes integration through play, offering canoeing activities and water-safety workshops to individuals and schools in the Kanto area.

Saran Shiroza, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Education and Language Education Department at International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan. Her research focuses on the global spread and diversification of English, exploring its pedagogical implications for English language teaching policies and practices in Japan and other non-English-speaking countries. She has published in *English Today* and other peer-reviewed journals, and she currently serves as a Review Editor for the journal *Asian Englishes*.

Chris Carl Hale, Ed.D., Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Global Communication and Language at Akita International University, is co-editor of *Teaching English at Japanese Universities: A New Handbook* (Routledge, 2019). He has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in language acquisition and teacher training in the United States and Japan for over

25 years. His research interests include second-language acquisition, conversation analysis and teacher development. He is a DJ and techno music producer.

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Appendix

Excerpts from Student Satisfaction Surveys 2023 and 2024

2023 Survey

2. 現在のIIEのクラスに関してどのように感じていますか。
How do you think about the current IIE class?

	不満	やや不満	ふつう	やや満足	非常に満足
クラス、先生...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
教材の内容な...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. IIEで4月、5月に学習したHealth&Medicineのモジュールの教材について、全体的にどのように感じていますか。
How do you think about the Materials for the Health & Medicine modules you studied in April and May in IIE classes?

	非常に難しい	やや難しい	ふつう	やや簡単	非常に簡単
リスニング	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
リーディング	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ボキャブラリ...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2024 Survey

2. 現在のELAのクラスに関してどのように感じていますか。★
What do you think about the current ELA class?

	不満	やや不満	ふつう	やや満足	非常に満足
クラス、先生...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
教材の内容な...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. ELAの教材について、全体的にどのように感じていますか。★
What do you think about the materials you studied in ELA so far this year?

	非常に難しい	やや難しい	ふつう	やや簡単	非常に簡単
リスニング	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
リーディング	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ボキャブラリ...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Note: The class name was changed from IIE (Interactive International English) in 2023 to ELA (English for Liberal Arts) in 2024, but the contents and teachers largely remained the same. In addition, in the survey, a small change was made in 2024 to the English translation of “How do you think...” to “What do you think...”.