

# Japanese University Students' Opinion of Content and Language Integration Learning

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## Abstract

As Content and Language Integration Learning (CLIL) classes become increasingly popular throughout the world, many benefits have been documented. For the most part, Japanese university students will take general English or exam preparation classes. However, recently there has been a noticeable shift towards universities offering CLIL based English classes to their language students. As such, the author of this study wanted to gather the opinions of students taking a CLIL class at a Japanese university. The results were overwhelming. The majority of students enjoyed their CLIL class, and responded that they felt it improved their communication skills, increased their topic knowledge, as well as increasing their higher order cognitive skills and gave them a more global outlook.

## Introduction

Content and Language Integration Learning (CLIL) is a teaching pedagogy that was first coined in Europe in the 1990s. In simple terms, “CLIL” is an approach used in language learning where there is a focus on both content and language; i.e. subjects are being taught to students whose first language is not the same as the one being used in the class. (Coyle et al, 2010) Since the 1990s, it has gained popularity across the world offering an alternative to general English classes. This approach does not solely focus on language learning, but rather content, and the language becomes the medium by which the content is learned; in turn, improving students' language. While CLIL is widely used across Europe and North America, it is a relatively new pedagogy in Japan. However, Davies and James (2017) in their paper made the case for increasing CLIL based classes for Japanese university students, and it is becoming more popular at universities across Japan. As such, this short case study wanted to uncover Japanese university students' opinion of their CLIL class.

The benefits of CLIL have been well documented. Coyle et al (2010) identified the benefits of CLIL as: content, communication, culture and cognition. However, for the purpose of this study the areas to be examined can be broken down into 5 I's:

1. Increased content knowledge
2. Increased motivation
3. Increased higher order cognitive skills
4. Improved global citizens
5. Increased communication skills.

To begin with, going back to the dual goal of CLIL, students will increase their content knowledge. In the case of this study, as students will spend two semesters researching their chosen global issues topic, it is hypothesized that students' content knowledge will increase. Furthermore, keeping motivation levels high among Japanese university students is a problem some English teachers may face in their classrooms. One possible explanation for this may be the use of commercial textbooks, which often tend to be mass produced and the content may not be relevant to a Japanese university student. One common feature of CLIL classes is that the materials used are often authentic. According to Pinner (2013), there is a correlation between the authentic materials used in CLIL classes and increased student motivation. As such, one of the aims of this paper is to determine if using authentic materials, such as newspapers and documentaries, motivates students to learn English more. Moreover, Coyle et al (2010) argues that CLIL based classes can improve students' higher cognitive skills. CLIL classes require students to engage with authentic content, and so it's argued that students can develop skills such as analysing, evaluating, reasoning, and comprehending. Another benefit of CLIL is that it cultivates global human resources. By using English as the medium to learn, it can be said that CLIL gives students a more global outlook. Also, the content of the CLIL classes in this study focus' on global issues. As such, in theory, the students

should have a greater understanding of global issues and become more global citizens. Sudhoff (2013) argues that CLIL is not only twofold, but in fact, is threefold, including language learning, content learning and intercultural learning. Finally, another benefit of teaching CLIL based classes is students have the opportunity to improve their English communication skills. While students are increasing their content knowledge of global issues, they are using English as the tool to discuss with their classmates in groups. In contrast to traditional grammar-translation or communicative based classes, CLIL classes “use the language as they learn it rather than spending years ‘rehearsing’ in a language class for a possible opportunity to use the language sometime in the future” (Georgiou 2012: 496)

## **Aim and Methods**

The aim of this study is straight forward. The author would like to evaluate students' opinions of their CLIL English classes at a Japanese university. The CLIL class in this study focuses on global issues. The students choose a global issue related topic and research it for homework every week. The students have to automatically engage with authentic materials in English, such as newspaper articles and documentaries to research their chosen topic. In their weekly class, they discuss the findings of their research with their classmates. The main goal is for students to gain a deep understanding of their chosen topic while improving their vocabulary and discussion skills.

The participants of this study are intermediate and advanced first- and second-year students from the Department of Law at a university in Tokyo. The students are currently enrolled in an English class that uses CLIL. Overall, 49 students responded to the survey. The data will be collected using a questionnaire at the end of the spring semester, 2021. The data was collected and stored in accordance with the university's ethical standards. The results of the questionnaire will be shown in the next section.

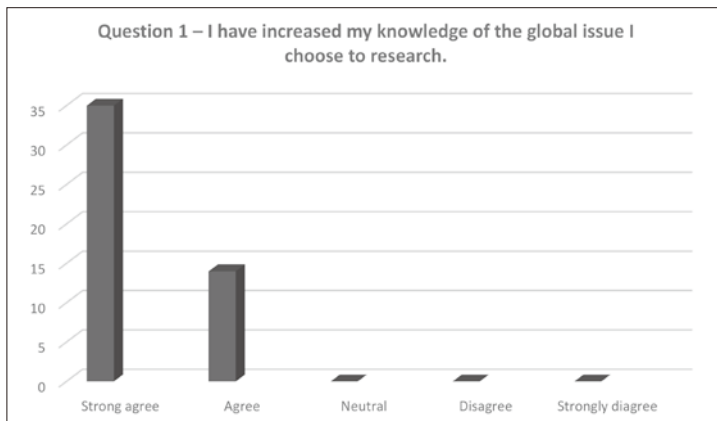
## Results

This section of the paper will show the results of each question from the questionnaire.

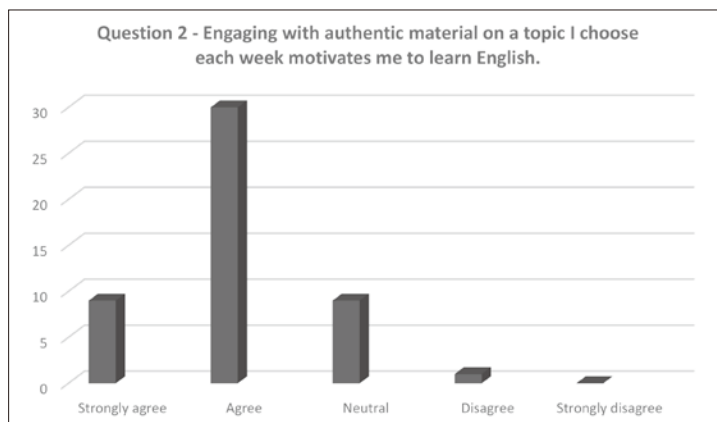
### **Question 1 – I have increased my knowledge of the global issue I choose to research.**

Question 1 wanted to determine if students' content knowledge increased. Overall, the feedback was positive with 100% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that their awareness of global issues had increased. On this question, students said:

- I can get some new knowledges which were researched by me and person in this class.
- It was easier to express my opinion than in the face-to-face situation, and I was able to learn social issues from various perspectives. (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

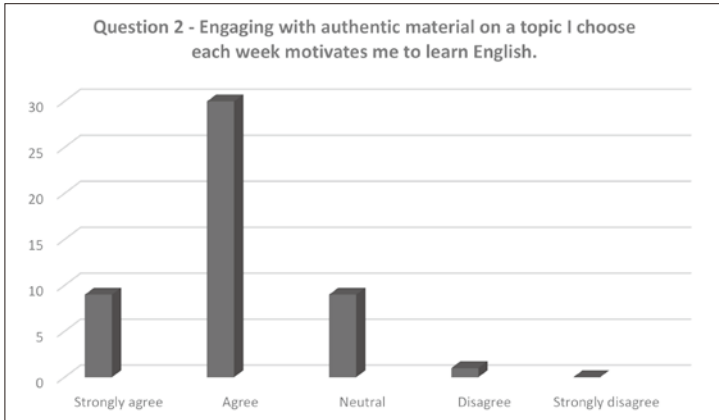


**Question 2 - Engaging with authentic material on a topic I choose each week motivates me to learn English.**



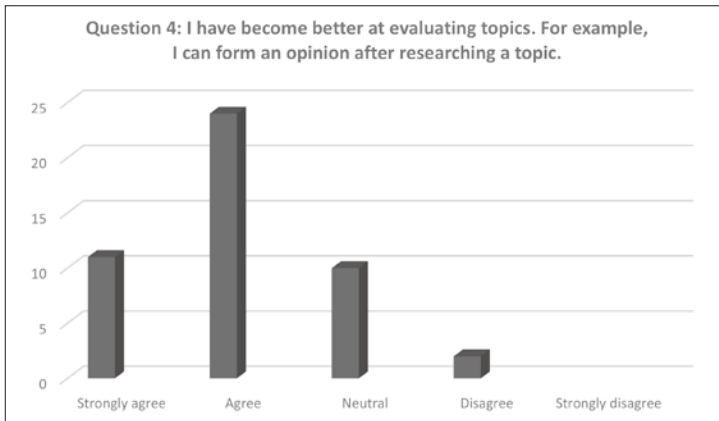
Question 2 wanted to determine whether using authentic materials instead of textbooks motivated students to learn English. The results of this were over-whelming. Of the 49 students survey, over 80% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Some students commented that “researching world problems in English improve my reading skill greatly” and “It is difficult for me to research every week and speak English. But, I came to want to improve my English skills through this semester.” (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

**Question 3: I have become better at analysing topics through my research every week. For example, I can compare 2 different sides of an argument.**



Questions 3, 4 and 5 focused on higher order cognitive skills. Firstly, the majority of students felt that they have become better at analysing topics. There were no negative responses to this question.

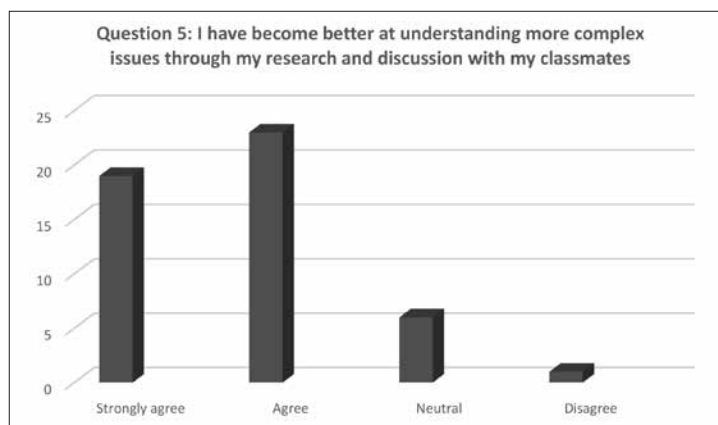
**Question 4: I have become better at evaluating topics. For example, I can form an opinion after researching a topic.**



Next, while there were 2 students who disagreed, 51% of students agreed and

23% of students strongly agreed that they have become better at evaluating topics and forming opinions on topics after extensive research. One student replied that “As my teacher told us to think about two different sides of an argument, I could think critically”. (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

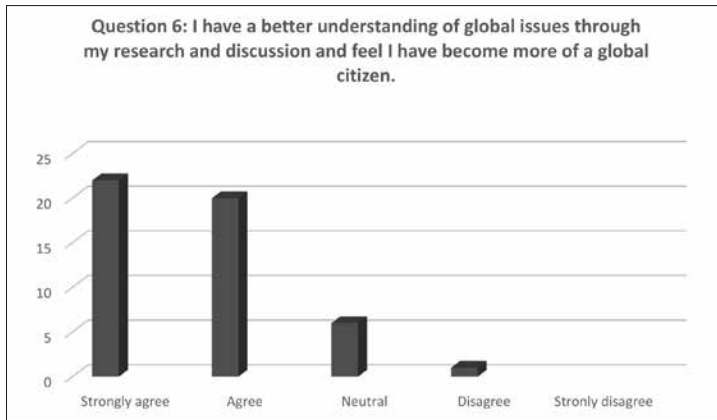
**Question 5: I have become better at understanding more complex issues through my research and discussion with my classmates.**



Question 5 focused on the higher order cognitive skill of comprehension. Almost 39% students strongly agreed that they have become better at understanding more complex issues, and a further 47% of students who agreed. One student disagreed with the statement, and a further 6 remained neutral. Some students commented;

- “to learn about one thing in two side is very good for learning about complicated issue.”
- “Not only look at the news, but also think what we can do to this problem.” (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

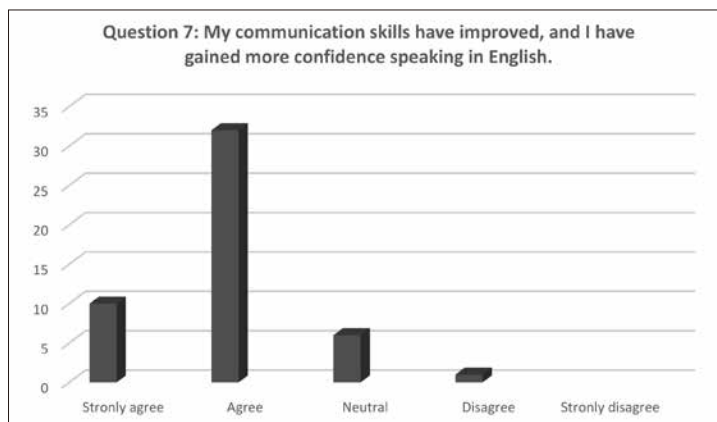
**Question 6: I have a better understanding of global issues through my research and discussion and feel I have become more of a global citizen.**



One of the benefits of the CLIL mentioned earlier was to foster global citizens. The results of question 6 mirror this. An overwhelming 85% of the students either or agreed or strong agreed that they have become better global citizens. One student relayed that “There were many new findings about global issues, and that was one of the things I liked about this class”. (Survey data, July 12, 2021)



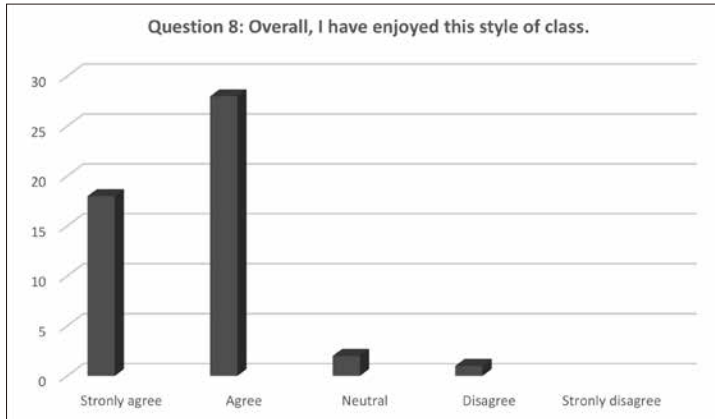
**Question 7: My communication skills have improved, and I have gained more confidence speaking in English.**



Question 7 focused on whether students felt that this style of class improved their communication skills and if they have gained more confidence when speaking English. 42 of the 49 students either agreed or disagreed. 6 students remained neutral in this question, and 1 student disagreed that their English communication skills have improved.

- Making PowerPoint slides and doing presentation in front of my classmates are very good for improving my communication skill in English
- I got more time to talk English each other in this class than other class, so I think it was good for developing my skills and to gain confidence speaking English.
- At first, I wasn't confident in presenting in English at all. However, as I repeated the number of times, I became confident in myself. (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

**Question 8: Overall, I have enjoyed this style of class.**



Finally, the survey wanted to get students' overall opinion of CLIL their classes. Over 57% of respondents agreed and a further 34% of students strongly agreed. One student responded that they strongly disagreed with this statement, however, they acknowledged that this was a mistake and had intended to respond with "strongly agree". Finally, one student disagreed and another 6 remained neutral. Some of the reasons students gave were;

- I got more time to talk English each other in this class than other class, so I think it was good for developing my skills and to gain confidence speaking English
- Because I could know the thinking that everyone has through communication in English.
- I enjoyed this class because I brushed up my speaking skills and presentation skill
- I had the opportunity to discuss with all the students, and I was able to learn a lot of knowledge and opinions. Compared to other English

classes, I had more opportunities to talk with the students and I personally liked the class style (Survey data, July 12, 2021)

## **Discussion**

The results of the survey are definitive. For almost all of the questions, over 80% of the 49 students surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements. Firstly, students felt that engaging with authentic material motivated them to learn English. The majority of English classes at university level use commercially produced textbooks that have many drawbacks (Guerrettaz and Johnson, 2013). However, this style of class focused on students autonomously engaging with authentic newspapers and documentaries, which students agreed gave them motivation to study English. Students also felt that their higher cognitive order skills improved. In this class, students were given the opportunity to analyze, evaluate and understand global issues topics throughout the semester. One of the goals of this class was to encourage students to think critically. Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, CLIL provides the opportunity to give students a global outlook. As the class focuses on global issues and the students are encouraged to research domestic issues in Japan, while also investigate issues from around and world. Finally, the area that received most comments from students was from question 7 regarding improved communication skills. The format of this class allowed ample time for pair and group discussion, with an introduction to presentation skills. Overall, the students' enjoyed this style of class. The results of the question 8 confirm this. While throughout the survey a minority of students disagreed or remained neutral, there were no negative comments received when students were given the opportunity to comment at the end of the survey.

The limitations of this study must also be mentioned. This is a short case study based on a small group of students. Thus, the results of this study may not be mirrored across all universities and student language levels. Furthermore, this study only gathered the opinions of the students, and so the results are

subjective. A larger study could include students taking a language proficiency test at the end of term as more objective data.

## Conclusion

In summary, the goal of this research was to evaluate students' attitudes towards their CLIL classes. Firstly, 5 benefits of CLIL were identified from previous research; (i) increased content knowledge, (ii) increased motivations (iii) increased higher order cognitive skills, (iv) fostering global citizens, (v) increased communication skills. The students were then surveyed on whether through their CLIL class, they felt they has improved in these areas. The feedback from the survey was conclusive. The majority of the students had the opinion that they improved in all 5 areas outlined above. Although CLIL may be relatively new in Japan, the results of this research show that Japanese students enjoy this style of class.

## References:

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## Appendix: A – Questionnaire (conducted electronically)

### *Students Awareness of the Skills acquired in Content and Language Integration Learning*

**Question 1** – I have increased my knowledge of the global issue I choose to research

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 2** - Engaging with authentic material on a topic I choose each week motivates me to learn English.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 3:** I have become better at analysing topics through my research every week. For example, I can compare 2 different sides of an argument.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 4:** I have become better at evaluating topics. For example, I can form an opinion after researching a topic.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 5:** I have become better at understanding more complex issues through my research and discussion with my classmates.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 6:** I have a better understanding of global issues through my research and discussion and feel I have become more of a global citizen.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 7:** My communication skills have improved, and I have gained more confidence speaking in English.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree

**Question 8:** Overall, I have enjoyed this style of class.

Strongly disagree    disagree    neutral    agree    Strongly agree