

## 授業探訪

言語系科目・英語自由科目

# Planning a CLIL course on second language acquisition and attending to mixed-level learners

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## Introduction

Within the Centre for Foreign Language Education and Research at Rikkyo University, elective courses are taught using Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a pedagogical approach which aims to develop linguistic and content knowledge simultaneously alongside critical thinking abilities and cultural awareness (see e.g., Coyle et al., 2010; Mehisto et al., 2008). Our adoption of this approach is driven by a need to bridge the gap between the mandatory, skills-based language learning courses that students undertake in their first year of university and content courses delivered fully in English that students undertake in later years of university (see Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). We offer CLIL courses at different levels, the highest of which are named CLIL seminar courses. CLIL seminar courses attend to a wide range of subjects including humanities (e.g., art, history), social sciences (e.g., health and wellness, psychology), and business (e.g., tourism, advertising). The purpose of this short paper is to detail my planning and teaching of a course entitled CLIL Seminars: Language Learning during the spring semester of the 2024 academic year. The discussion is broken broadly into two halves. In the first section, I present an overview of the course, detailing content choices, linguistic support, and student enrolment. In the second section, I discuss the most challenging aspect of the course; namely, that students on the course were of a wide variety of language proficiency levels. I outline two ways that course texts were adapted to support lower-level students and challenge higher-level students.

## Course Overview

### Content foci

Content within CLIL Seminars: Language Learning focused on theoretical and practical topics related to second language acquisition and second language education. An overview of the content foci of the course is represented visually in Figure 1.

As can be seen, the content on the course consisted of three thematic units. In Unit 1: Key Ideas, the students studied important theoretical positions related to first and second language acquisition. These included biological considerations (such as the critical period hypothesis) and the philosophical underpinnings of language learning (such as behaviourism, interactionism, and innatism). The purpose of this first unit was to provide students with a conceptual foundation upon which to build subsequent learning. In Unit 2: Second Language Learning, the students studied functional topics related to how languages are taught and learned. The lessons in this unit targeted empirically substantiated methods for vocabulary and grammar acquisition, the importance of adequate input and output, and best practice on error correction. An important guiding question when preparing for unit 2 was ‘how do the theoretical underpinnings studied in unit 1 manifest in language learning and teaching?’ Finally, in Unit 3: Influencing Factors, the students studied internal and external contextual conditions that afford and inhibit language acquisition. Such conditions included individual differences, motivation, emotion, and the classroom social environment. Again, the learning here was driven by an important guiding question; specifically, what

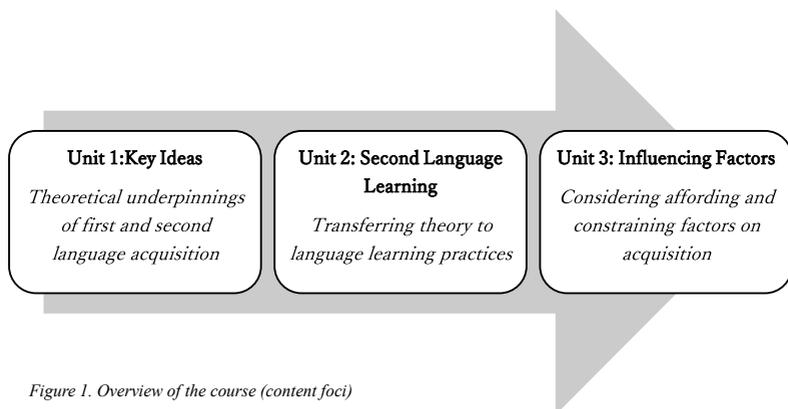


Figure 1. Overview of the course (content foci)

factors impact the classroom learning principles that the students studied in unit 2?

This short overview illustrates how the content learning on the course was structured so that each unit built upon the ideas studied in previous classes. The organising decisions afforded repetition and reinforcement of concepts and language as the students came to understand how effective language teaching and learning are dependent upon sound theoretical principles and contextual considerations.

**Linguistic foci**

Throughout the course, a wide number of language points were studied in relation to the content topics. The primary heuristic I used for selecting language points was Coyle et al.'s (2010) language triptych. This tool encourages teachers to make linguistic-study decisions that attend to three different areas: language of learning (specific language related to the topic of second language acquisition), language for learning (language needed for success in classroom tasks) and language through learning (emergent language experienced within any given lesson). Too many language points were explored during the 14-week course to list in this short paper; however, in figure 2, I exemplify the linguistic choices that were employed during lessons 5 and 6 of the course. These lessons related to language learning hypotheses known as the input hypothesis and output hypothesis (lesson 5) and to error correction (lesson 6).

As may be observed in the list, the linguistic points in these two lessons attended to a range of language points including vocabulary, grammar, and

Language of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocabulary relating to research (lesson 5)</li> <li>• Collocations of adverbs relating to errors and feedback (lesson 6)</li> </ul>
Language for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The grammar of reporting verbs when sharing research findings (lesson 5)</li> <li>• Highlighting important information when sharing findings (Lesson 6)</li> </ul>
Language through learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The strength of reporting verbs (lesson 5)</li> <li>• The meaning of the prefixes "in", "im", "ir", "ex", "dis" (lesson 6)</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Examples of linguistic content from lessons 5 and 6 of the course.

pragmatics. This was a deliberate choice driven by my recognition that CLIL teachers are sometimes guilty of overprioritizing vocabulary instruction at the expense of grammatical form instruction (Baecher et al., 2013). Linguistic choices on the course were both proactive and reactive. In other words, some linguistic points were selected in advance by me in order to adequately prepare students for the texts and tasks they would be working with (e.g., vocabulary relating to research, grammar of reporting verbs), while others arose unplanned during lessons as I observed emergent opportunities for learning (e.g., prefix meanings).

### **Student enrolment**

CLIL seminar courses are designed for students of a B2 and higher English ability, but the B2 level is merely advisory and students are able to self-select to attend courses without any formal entry testing. The benefits of this kind of self-selection are numerous: Students are able to choose classes which interest them and challenge them, and the administrative labour required by formal pre-assessment is removed. In practical terms, however, this also means that CLIL seminar courses can contain learners at a range of English proficiencies.

The CLIL Seminars: Language Learning course was popular, with 25 students enrolling from a range of colleges at Rikkyo University. The students' English levels were highly variable, with self-reports revealing perceived linguistic abilities in the range of upper beginner (A2) through to advanced (C1-C2) for both discussion and reading. A little over half of the students reported themselves as being at either intermediate or upper-intermediate levels of English (B1-B2), with 24% at advanced and 24% at upper beginner levels. The advanced level students also included a small number of students who identified as first-language English speakers. In practice, this diverse range of students meant that I had to make significant changes to content delivery to ensure that the material was adequately demanding for students at the highest level, whilst also accessible to those at the lower levels. In the second half of this paper, I would like to detail some of the ways that I made such changes.

## **Managing Learning for the Mixed-Level Students**

I employed multiple holistic approaches to supporting my mixed-level

learners. For example, I was open and honest with them about the presence of mixed language levels, and I proactively described the benefits of mixed-level learning groups. Occasionally, I gave different tasks to lower- and higher-level students which were fitting with their ability level, but mostly, in line with Vygotskian principles (Vygotsky, 1978), I afforded the students opportunities to interact with peers of a range of linguistic abilities. I was particularly concerned that the first-language English speakers on the course would lack challenge, so I initiated discussions on how they might adjust their language when interacting with lower-level students, and why such adaptation is important in real-world multicultural business situations (e.g., Rogerson-Revell, 2010).

One other important way that learners of different levels can be attended to is through the use of texts of varying levels, with grammar, language, and content complexity adjusted to suit the requirements of the students. Such a strategy poses an obvious challenge for teachers: the writing and editing of texts requires a significant amount of time and effort. While new generative AI technologies are able to support teachers in these endeavours (see e.g., Koraishi, 2023), I would like to discuss two other ways that complex and authentic texts were used in my course with students of different abilities.

### **Method 1: Highlighting key sections for lower-level students**

In lesson 9 of the course, the students learnt about individual differences affecting second language acquisition. To readers who may not be familiar, individual differences refer to relatively stable psychological characteristics that exist amongst learners, and they include features such as aptitude, learning style, personality, and beliefs on second language acquisition. For this lesson, the open access paper *Individual differences in language learning and teaching: A complex/dynamic/socio-ecological/holistic view* (Griffiths & Soruç, 2021) was chosen because it provides succinct summaries of the state of research in relation to numerous individual differences and their impact on language learning. The students were asked to focus on four paragraph-length subsections from the article. Each subsection related to a specific individual difference: aptitude, learning style, personality, and beliefs. Although the full text is naturally complex, the summarising nature of the chosen paragraphs meant that they were accessible to even those without a background in applied linguistics.

To suitably challenge both lower- and higher-level learners, I offered two

forms of this text to the students, one labelled advanced-level, and one labelled intermediate-level. The students were tasked with reading each of the four sections of the text to find the answer to the following question: Is there strong, weak, or mixed evidence that this individual difference affects language learning? The advanced level text was the authentic version of Griffiths and Soruç's (2021) paper. In this case, I had made no modifications of the text so the students were tasked with reading each section in full to find the required answers. The intermediate-level text was similarly an authentic version of the text, but with one difference – I had used a highlighting function to call attention to key areas of the text that I wanted the students to focus on. These key areas were generally a sentence or two in length. They were chosen because they were accessible with regards to language and also because they contained information that would help the students find the answers I was seeking.

Figure 3 gives a short example of the kind of highlighting that was used in relation to the topic of learning style. As can be seen in the figure, the intermediate-level text supports students who may be of a lower level by

<p><b>Advanced-level text</b> Learners can be quite distinct from each other in their learning style, which can present issues in a classroom environment (e.g., where students who like to work quietly on their own must try to concentrate on their work among kinaesthetic learners who want to move around and interact), and good learners seem to be more capable than less successful learners of style-stretching to suit a given learning situation [42]. However, as Nel [78] observes, there does not seem to be any one style which is typical of good language learners or which seems more likely than any other to lead to success.</p>	<p><b>Intermediate-level text</b> <u>Learners can be quite distinct from each other in their learning style</u>, which can present issues in a classroom environment (e.g., where students who like to work quietly on their own must try to concentrate on their work among kinaesthetic learners who want to move around and interact), and good learners seem to be more capable than less successful learners of style-stretching to suit a given learning situation [42]. <u>However, as Nel [78] observes, there does not seem to be any one style which is typical of good language learners or which seems more likely than any other to lead to success.</u></p>
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Figure 3. Advanced- and intermediate-level texts. Adapted from Griffiths and Soruç, 2021, p.343

highlighting important conclusions in relation to the impact of learning style on language acquisition processes. This highlighting means that lower-level students can access the required content knowledge, and also allows them to pass over complex language and ideas which are of irrelevance to the question they are seeking answers to.

This method represents one way that authentic texts were adapted during the course to support the mixed-level abilities of enrolled students. A second method employed a new online program driven by generative AI to help students to interact with the texts that they were being asked to read.

### **Method 2: Using ChatPDF to level the playing field**

A second way that I employed authentic texts in an accessible way was by leveraging AI technology through a program called ChatPDF. Summarily speaking, ChatPDF is an application which allows users to have text-driven conversations with a PDF text that they have uploaded. Such conversations involve users typing questions, with generative AI then searching the PDF for answers and supplying textual responses (please see Paterson & Hakone, 2024, from which I first learned of this tool and how it may be utilised).

I used this program during lesson 2 of the course. During that lesson, the students learnt about the differences between first and second language acquisition. The chosen text for the class was entitled *Comparing and contrasting first and second language acquisition: Implications for language teachers* (Ipek, 2009). This 9-page open-source article was chosen because it gave a very clear summary of the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition. The students in the class were divided into two groups, with one group tasked to find similarities between first and second language acquisition and the other to find differences.

The article is long and undoubtedly complex for many of the students in the course, so the purpose of employing ChatPDF was to level the playing field. This is because ChatPDF can be used to not only produce answers to questions, but also, if prompted, to simplify language so that answers can be understandable even at lower levels of English proficiency.

The students were taught how to upload the PDF into the program and how to ask questions. I provided example prompts to students, which can be found in figure 4. As can be seen, the prompts related both to how the students might seek answers to the required questions, and also to how the students might simplify the language that ChatPDF produced.

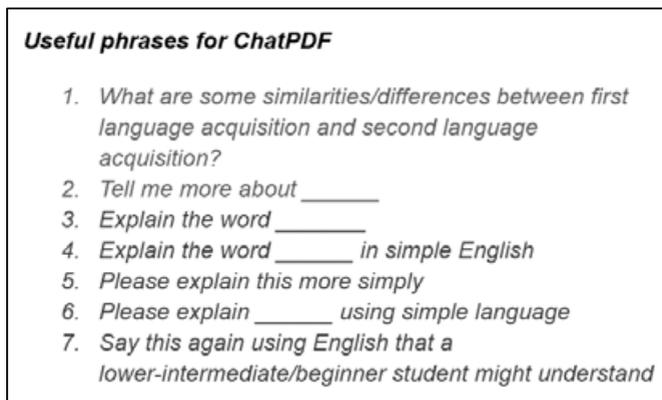


Figure 4. Prompts used with ChatPDF

The students were asked to follow a four-stage process when interacting with the PDF. These four steps were (1) to ask a question, (2) to simplify the answer until they could understand it clearly, (3) to ask follow up questions, or for more information, and (4) to try to check the accuracy of the information the program had provided by reading the relevant part of the original text (the program automatically highlights the location of information it provides). Step 4 is particularly important given that generative AI may produce inaccurate responses, and with ChatPDF, the relevant text can be easily highlighted and reviewed.

In my eyes, the use of ChatPDF in this case was particularly effective in providing content knowledge to a mixed-level class. The fact that the language could be simplified within the program itself meant that even lower-level students were able to access the content knowledge being studied. In addition, that ChatPDF is a new technology meant that even first-language English speaking students were able to feel engaged with the learning process. Many positive comments were received from students in feedback on the use of the program. Some comments discussed the fact that checking the original text for accuracy was not easy, and any teachers employing this program should be sure to monitor low-level students to ensure they are receiving accurate knowledge.

### Closing remarks

The science of language learning is naturally a popular topic for those choosing to study English through a CLIL curriculum, and that was indeed

the case with CLIL Seminars: Language Learning. This paper has detailed the content and language foci and explored two ways that mixed-level students were supported during the course. My intention is to continue to develop the course over upcoming years to improve the lessons and outcomes for students.

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