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Implementing CLIL in Japanese Universities: A Detailed Case Study

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Abstract

Japanese universities face significant challenges in improving students' English ability to prepare for English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, English study overseas, and future careers. Transitioning from communicative-based instruction to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is one promising solution. This article—based on a MEXT-funded Kakenhi project involving researchers at four major universities—reports on comprehensive reform of a semi-intensive 1st-year program of 250 students. It outlines the rationale, innovative approaches adopted, challenges faced, and outcomes achieved. The curriculum implemented a coordinated CLIL approach across six weekly classes, focusing on liberal arts content in areas such as sociology, economics, earth sciences, biology, and natural history. Among the results: students achieved a 107% to 140% higher rate of TOEFL ITP score gain from the beginning of the year to the end compared to the previous 7-year average. They also expressed high rates of student satisfaction. The materials developed are designed for adaptation by other universities and in April 2025 the researchers hope to make them accessible in a Google platform online.

Introduction

Despite the slow pace of curricular reform in Japanese higher education, indications of potentially transformative change are emerging. Brown and Bradford (2019) observe in their research on CLIL and EMI in Japan,

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

More recently, Brown (2023) spotlights this continuing shift towards English in Japanese higher education by noting that more than 40 percent of Japanese universities currently provide specialized topic courses delivered in English (p. 3). Increased emphasis on English proficiency and English-medium instruction are also reflected in the Ministry of Education's (MEXT) support for initiatives like the large multi-year Kakenhi grant given to the author's team of researchers—drawn from four

prominent liberal arts universities—to reform the first-year English curriculum at one particular institution as a possible model for other universities to follow (Wadden, 2021).

This intensified focus on university English instruction is also evident in the growing emphasis on liberal arts programs and curricula. The Daigaku Times (2020) observes that 56 out of 805 institutions in Japan support liberal arts education. Brown and Bradford also note the wider context of this trend: “The adoption of EMI in Japanese universities follows the worldwide trend toward internationalizing higher education” (2019, p. 104). In addition, following the end of Covid-19 restrictions on inbound and outbound travel, universities across Japan are intently moving to reestablish overseas study and exchange programs.

This increasing emphasis on English in Japanese higher education has led, in part, to a wider adoption of international standards for English achievement. Educational Testing Service (ETS), responsible for the creation and distribution of the TOEFL and TOEIC tests, reports that 153 universities in Japan currently utilize the TOEFL ITP for entrance, placement, performance assessment, pre/post testing, overseas programs, and additional purposes (2024). Numerous other universities, as noted by ETS, utilize the TOEFL iBT, TOEIC, or IELTS as a standard for language performance.

For all of the reasons outlined above, universities and their English departments throughout Japan now face significant challenges in curriculum design and in achieving better English proficiency outcomes. Among these are

- Engaging students more intensively and effectively during their first-year English study
- Improving students’ readiness for EMI courses in their following university years
- Preparing students for overseas study at English-speaking universities
- Raising achievement levels in TOEFL, TOEIC, or IELTS at their institutions
- Readying graduates for careers that will involve English communication (or least interaction with English), in business, government, education, and the non-profit sector
- Fulfilling the Ministry of Education's (MEXT) aims and objectives in liberal arts, English Medium Instruction (EMI) and English proficiency initiatives

Context: Low English Proficiency and Lack of Liberal Arts Education

The curriculum innovation undertaken by the researchers, in addition to being aligned with the Ministry of Education goals, is partially motivated by a troubling backdrop: Japan's low English proficiency relative to other countries. In 2023, Education First (EF) ranked Japan 87th out of 113 countries, reflecting a continuous fall in its rating since 2011 (Nippon.com, 2023). Data from ETS indicates that Japan has regularly recorded among the lowest average TOEFL scores in Asia over the past two decades. In 2022, the most recent year for which results are available, it held the third-lowest ranking in Asia, with an average score of 73, above only Laos and Tajikistan, with their aggregate scores of 70 (ETS, 2023).

What accounts for this subpar performance? Traditional explanations include an excessive focus on grammar in Japan's secondary education system (Snyder, 2019); a significant linguistic advantage by other Asian countries historically colonized by English-speaking nations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines; and a higher percentage of Japanese students taking the TOEFL which has the effect of lowering the national average (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019; Reedy, 2000; Takeno & Moritoshi, 2018). These justifications, however, fail to acknowledge that other nations in Northeast Asia, including South Korea and China, consistently outpace Japan in English competency. Moreover, these countries have not historically been governed by English-speaking colonial powers (unlike Hong Kong or Singapore); they also share, with Japan, a common educational history of adopting grammar- and audio-lingual approaches, more recently supplanted by communicative-based methods.

A more plausible explanation for Japan's low TOEFL scores—a notable concern at the case-study university—is that unlike the materials in standard high school and university English textbooks, the TOEFL predominantly assesses students' comprehension of traditional liberal arts fields through reading passages and brief academic lectures. In fact, most of the materials on the TOEFL are sourced directly from textbooks used at North America universities, particularly from undergraduate liberal arts courses. As the executive director of TOEFL at ETS states, "Most items that you will encounter on a TOEFL test tend to be drawn directly from university-level textbooks, from the courses that students would typically encounter in a first- or second-year liberal arts class" (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020). The ETS website (2024) further observes that the TOEFL ITP reading test is "designed to measure the ability to read and understand short passages similar in topic and style to those read in courses taught at North American universities and colleges."

As noted above, the ITP is the most frequently utilized form of the test in Japanese universities. Consequently, the English study materials in both secondary and tertiary education in Japan do not align with the liberal arts emphasis of the ITP assessment. This observation led the

researchers-curriculum designers to formulate a critical hypothesis in their original research proposal in 2021, which guided their subsequent curricular reform: One major curricular shortcoming of Japanese high schools and universities in preparing students for English-medium study at the university level, domestically and internationally, is overlooking liberal arts content; this is evidenced by lack of preparedness for EMI courses, poor TOEFL performance, and low English proficiency. (Wadden, 2021).

Discontinuity in English Language Curricula: An Additional Consideration

Another consideration for curriculum designers at Japanese universities is the prior English education that students have received. Underwood and Glasgow (2019) describe the overall setting of English instruction in Japanese secondary and tertiary education as follows:

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

This lack of continuity likely has a serious impact on language acquisition. In addition, most university courses in Japan, irrespective of the subject, are conducted in weekly sessions known as koma, usually delivered by a single professor for 90 minutes. The academic year comprises two terms, each spanning 14 to 15 weeks. In the typical university, a professor individually selects the course materials and instructs a semester- or year-long course of 14-15 or 29-30 class sessions. The professor's course often has little or no direct connection with students' other courses, or their previous high school classes. In language study, nearly all language learners recognize that studying a foreign language once a week is inadequate for attaining significant progress. This system results in the relative ineffectiveness of foreign language acquisition.

In contrast, since 2015, the researchers' case study English program in a Faculty of International Liberal Arts at a major private university has been structured around four 90-minute English courses each week. Two partner teachers, one non-Japanese and the other Japanese, co-instruct this weekly 4-koma series utilizing shared materials. All teachers are full-time and the curriculum and its contents are coordinated among all classes. This curriculum structure encourages coherence and focus, enabling the 240 first-year students as a cohort to engage with the same

materials and receive similar assessment—with minor course-specific modifications—in relatively small classes of 13-15 students. This curriculum system facilitates greater teacher-student engagement than in many other programs, as lesson planning, course materials, and evaluation are all coordinated. Yet despite this curricular focus and 4-koma a week of concentrated study, during the six years (2015-2021) preceding the implementation of the new curriculum, students achieved relatively minor improvement in their TOEFL ITP scores. First-year students from all divisions, departments, and campuses at the case study university are required to take pre- and post-TOEFL ITP tests during their first year. The effectiveness of the English programs throughout the university are then assessed based upon this standard. In the researchers' faculty, students averaged an increase of 14 points annually over seven years, leading senior administrators to question the English program's efficacy.

This lackluster performance—along with the TOEFL's focus on liberal arts content—motivated the curriculum reform, which was structured into five phases:

2020 Phase 1: Selection of liberal arts subjects and preliminary draft of the teaching text units called “modules”.

2021 Phase 2: Implementation of modules for limited instruction in three pilot classes, with twelve control group classes continuing with the prior curriculum.

2022 Phase 3: Implementation of liberal arts modules across all teachers and classes.

2023 Phase 4: Continued use of liberal arts modules in all classes with enhanced support and scaffolding resources such as a learner's workbook, as well as the implementation of content tests for each module.

2024 Phase 5: Further refinement of content modules and content tests, creation of additional support materials, sharing of materials with other universities.

Curricular Innovation: Aims and Contents of CLIL Modules

Prior to the curriculum revision, the first-year English curriculum in the case-study program—like those at most universities in Japan—was based upon monolingual EFL textbooks featuring a fairly standard sequence of reading, listening, writing, speaking, and vocabulary activities. The main shortcoming of this pedagogy is that commercial textbooks may cover broad themes like globalization, energy, and aging, but do not explore them in detail because they prioritize communicative tasks and general

language structures over content-based knowledge, core subject matter, and subject-specific vocabulary (Wadden, Onoda, & Van Amelsvoort, 2023). As a result, they fail to acquaint students with the concepts and vocabulary of “university-level textbooks” in “first- or second-year liberal arts classes,” which provide the basis for TOEFL content (Gopal as cited in Moody, 2020) and which better prepare students for EMI courses in the same areas.

The TOEFL often features contents in broad traditional subjects such as zoology, geology, sociology, and economics. Moreover, at the case study university, sociology, economics, and health are prominent upperclass courses; hence, CLIL modules in these disciplines provide the additional benefit of preparing students for advanced study. In the first two years of curricular reform (2022-2023), collaboration between discipline-specific professors and language teachers occurred, leading to the enhancement of module content. Curriculum designers also worked hard on the integration of supplementary learning activities, and the creation of an online workbook containing scaffolded exercises in reading, vocabulary, speaking, and writing. In 2023, content tests were devised and administered at the end of each module unit to measure students' understanding of the essential topics and concepts covered in each field.

The curriculum designers created six modules with 60-70 pages of instructional materials in Health and Medicine, Zoology, Natural History, Sociology, Economics, and Earth Science. These content areas were chosen based upon an analysis of the subject matter of 10 TOEFL ITP exams (Wadden et al., 2001), anticipated courses the students would take later in their university study, and the university's historical identity. The texts were initially created at two separate levels of complexity: a basic level with fewer passages and a limited range of topics, language structures, and vocabulary; and a standard level with a greater number of reading and listening passages which covered a wider variety of subjects within each discipline. Each module consists of 3-8 reading passages, 5-12 brief academic lectures, 60-80 discipline-specific essential vocabulary phrases, 80-100 general target vocabulary terms, and reading and listening comprehension exercises that replicate TOEFL practice. In 2024, the listening portion has been expanded and separated into a separate text. The curriculum designer's pedagogical assumption has been that in their CLIL-based instruction, to use Smit and Dafouz's words, “students are engaged in a joint learning practice of subject matter and foreign language” (2012, p. 1). Thus, in addition to acquiring the English language, students should obtain fundamental understanding in particular academic areas. The biggest challenge of this strategy is to achieve the Goldilocks balance of utilizing language in the materials that is not too difficult but not too easy, so students can improve their language ability while grasping the conceptual knowledge of the academic subjects.

Figure 1

Cover illustrations from 3 modules



Curricular Innovation: Structure of Modules

The learning materials within the modules are arranged in a particular strategic sequence, though individual teachers may modify the order, integrate supplementary activities for additional support, and emphasize reading or listening depending upon their collaborative workload with their partner teacher.

1. Opening discussion questions to activate existing knowledge and spark interest.
2. A bilingual list of discipline-specific academic vocabulary offering key content language in addition to parallel Quizlet materials with its various learning activities (such as flash cards and games) and capacity for students to personalize their own vocabulary decks.
3. Reading passages with liberal arts content that offer general overviews of the field (the main areas of health and medicine or the principle fields sociologists study, for example) followed by passages on particular topics (how specific diseases spread, the particular ways which sociologists study societies). Building intellectual and lexical understanding of the field is the initial goal. Next, in order to teach and promote the use of reading strategies (the first L in CLIL refers to “Language” learning), students read through a passage, annotate it by highlighting key sections, underline confusing or unknown parts, and summarize sections (Groen, et. al., 2021). This annotation of text improves multiple reading skills, cultivates overall study skills, and encourages independent learning of essential concepts.
4. Following their comprehension efforts, students can check the Japanese translations of core reading passages in appendixes at the end of the module to confirm their understanding.

5. Listening content consist of brief lectures and online videos that augment and clarify the readings, while offering students practice in lecture note-taking. In addition, students encounter visual organization of knowledge in charts and diagrams, and make their own further outlines and visual representations, to enhance their understanding and retention of critical vocabulary and concepts (Jiang, 2012).
6. Finally, content understanding is evaluated through short-answer written tests and multiple-choice vocabulary exams on key concepts. These tests underscore student responsibility to learn both language and content. Moreover, since all first-year students participate in these exams, they also create a common university experience and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and viewpoints across various courses and language competence levels.

Figure 2

Sample text, Reading for Knowledge 1: An Introduction to Sociology



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

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

Lower- and mid-level classes use adapted modules, resources from the online Workbook, and a slightly modified methodology. The goal is to preserve the essential meaning of the content readings while removing and simplifying some of the technical vocabulary. A wider array of academic and general language is introduced, emphasizing formulaic terms frequently utilized in academic discourse (Durrant, 2018). Concept verification and schema activation represent the preliminary stages in each module. A lecture-focused listening exercise introduces certain discourse aspects, such as causal language, methods for summarizing lectures, and temporal adverbial phrases. This not only highlights crucial vocabulary but also exposes students to specific discourse characteristics and enables the requisite repetition of vocabulary for effective learning (Pellicer-Sánchez et al., 2022; Walqui & van Lier, 2012; Webb & Nation, 2017).

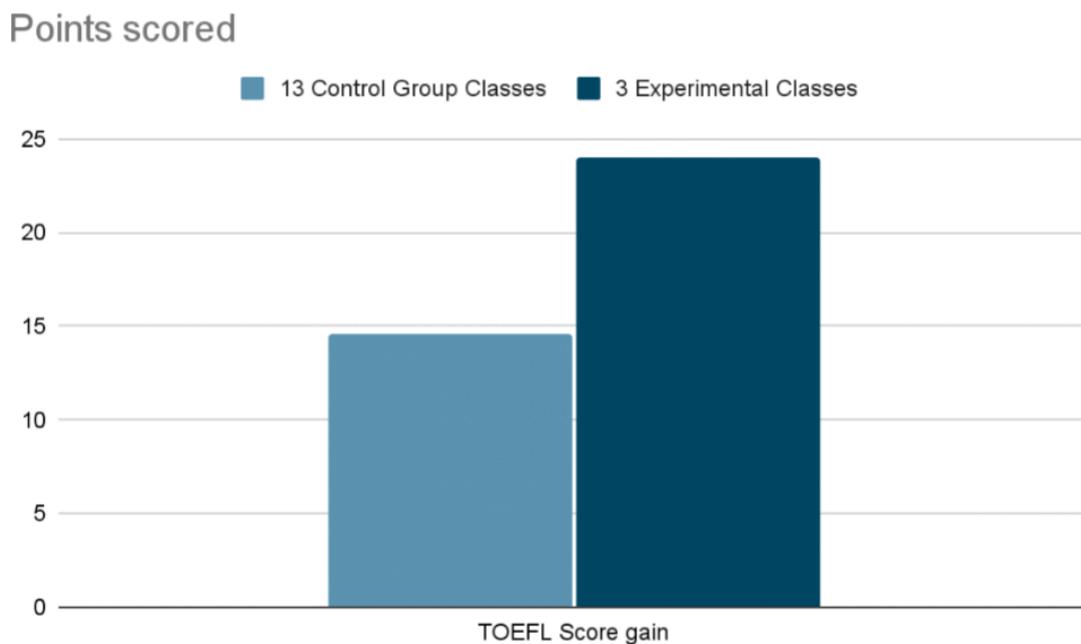
Significant Results

The implementation of the CLIL curriculum led to significant outcomes. The program's approximately 240 first-year students take the TOEFL ITP in April and subsequently in late December. As mentioned above, the university administration prioritizes ITP score improvement as a measure of achievement and proficiency across all faculties and undergraduate programs, conducting annual reviews of current performance against historical averages, such as the annual score gain from 2015 to 2024 in the case study faculty. Partly as result of this scrutiny, the researchers-curriculum designers implemented curricular change with caution and in steps. In 2021, three out of sixteen classes were selected to partially pilot early prototypes of the Liberal Arts modules: one instructor in the three experimental sections utilized traditional course materials for two classes each week, while the other instructor adopted an initial prototype of the Liberal Arts modules in the other two classes. In 2021, students in the 13 control classes using traditional materials (commercial English texts) achieved a TOEFL ITP score increase of 14.6 from April to December, closely mirroring the average score growth of 14 points

over the preceding six years. By contrast, the average score gain in the three pilot courses utilizing the Liberal Arts modules during one-half of their class meetings was +24 points. This was 74% higher compared to the 13-class control group.

Figure 3

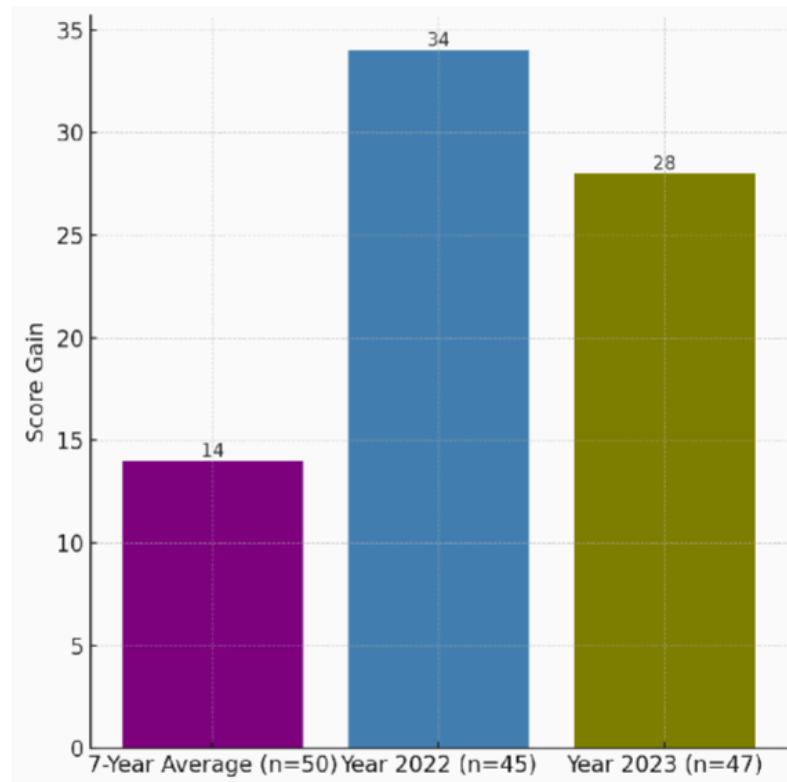
Comparative Results of 2021 Pilot TOEFL Score Gain between Groups from April to December



In 2022, the new CLIL curriculum was implemented across all 16 classes, and the Liberal Arts modules were used by all instructors. Although the 2021 trial offered grounds for optimism, the 2022 outcomes were significantly more successful than anticipated. The complete first-year cohort had an average increase of 34 points compared to the historical average of 14 points over seven years from 2015 to 2021. This score improvement with the revised CLIL curriculum was 140% greater than the historical average. In 2023, a new online Workbook was collaboratively created by the teachers, module materials were enhanced, content tests were implemented, and an additional koma was added to the students' English courseload, bringing the total to five koma. The students' TOEFL score improvements from April to December again significantly surpassed the 14-point historical norm but were slightly lower than the previous year. The 16 student classes achieved a 29-point increase, surpassing the historical norm by 107%.

Figure 4

Comparative Results from Full Curriculum Implementation in 2022 and 2023 from April to December



In addition to using TOEFL as an outcome criteria, the researchers administered brief Student Satisfaction surveys to evaluate students' perceptions of their classes. In the spring of 2023, 161 out of 240 students provided responses via a Google Form. The majority of respondents (67%) were "satisfied" or "very satisfied". In 2024, 140 students out of approximately 240 responded to the same survey and even a higher proportion (78%) indicated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied". Regrettably, no surveys were conducted in the seven years preceding the curriculum reform, so there is no comparative data.

Figure 5

Survey Results 2023. Your Thoughts on Classroom Atmosphere and Instructor's Approach

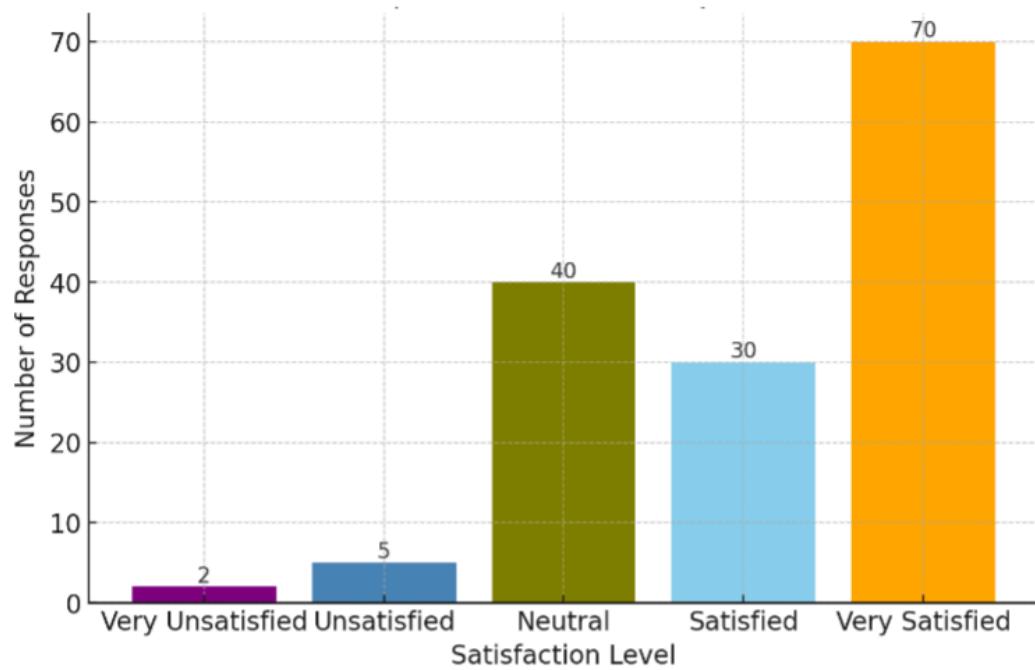
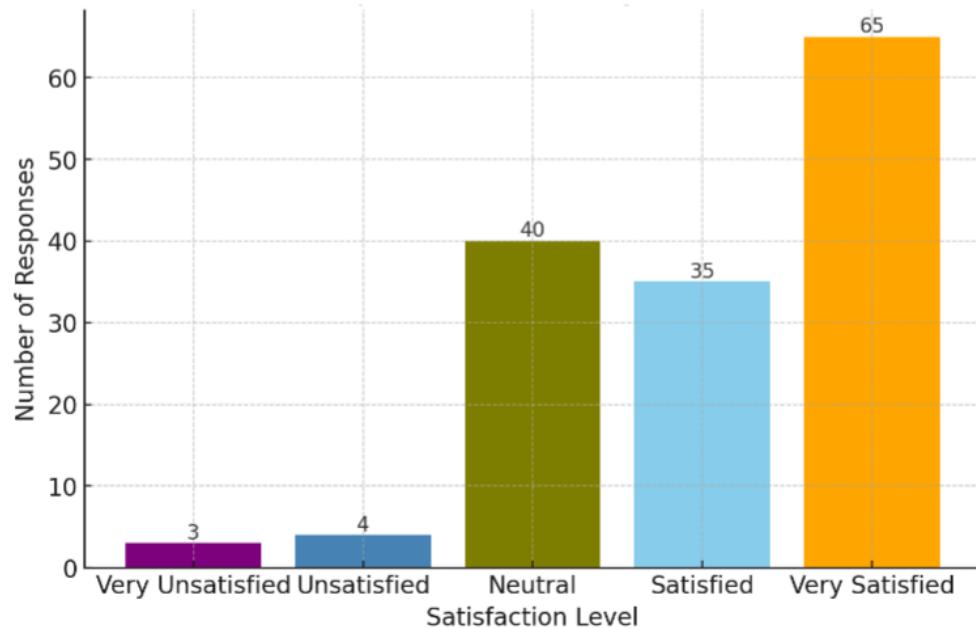


Figure 6

Survey Results 2024. Your Thoughts on Classroom Atmosphere and Instructor's Approach



Opinions concerning students' thoughts on the learning material were also surveyed in 2023 and 2024 and are indicated in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7

Survey Results - Your Thoughts on the Learning Materials (2023).

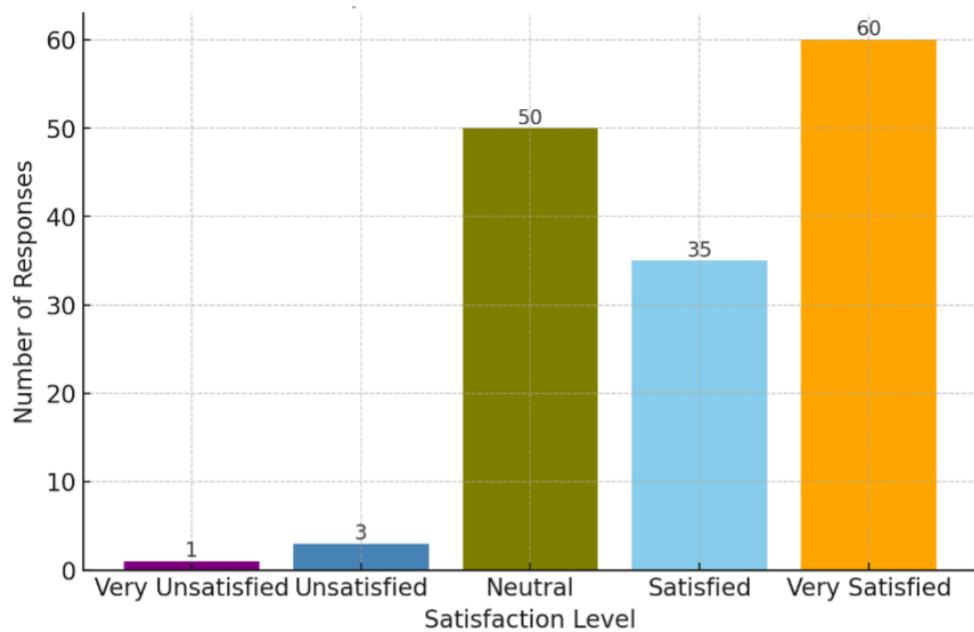
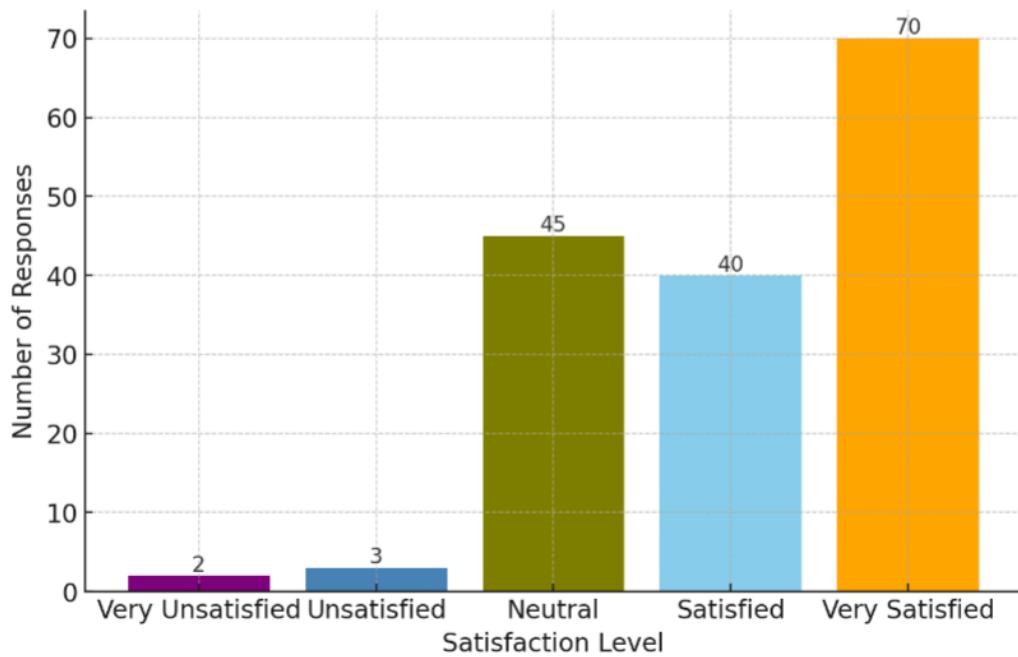


Figure 8

Survey Results - Your Thoughts on the Learning Materials (2024).



Conclusion

Has the implementation of a CLIL Curriculum at the case study university met its goals? The answer is definitely “Yes” when considering surprisingly high TOEFL outcomes as well as student satisfaction. However, the curriculum designers at the case study university and faculty at other universities seeking similar improvements face several obstacles. First, the case-study institution must improve the language scaffolding for lower- and mid-level classes. To help students transition into academic reading and listening following their high school study, additional preview and activation activities, more frequent reviews of key concepts and vocabulary, and more repetition of content and skills through re-reading, re-listening, re-telling, re-writing, and re-calling via alternative skills are needed.

The online Workbook, which supplements the printed module and is constantly updated by instructors, will help address these concerns. In addition, reading and listening difficulty must be calibrated more precisely to keep students in the zone of proximal development so that materials are at the right level for their learning. At present, the researchers are using AI technologies like ChatGPT and Gemini to generate several iterations of passages for lower-level classes to help students improve comprehension. In addition, CLIL-based learning is hindered by gaps in the students’ vocabulary knowledge of words in the New General Service List (NGSL), which comprises the 2,800 most commonly used English words (Browne 2014; Wadden, Onoda, Van Amelsvoort, et al., 2023). The researchers and curriculum designers hope to improve students’ foundational vocabulary in 2024 and 2025 through an in-house designed NGSL vocabulary program.

Further possible impediments are institutional and educational. To build a strong English program, a university must invest in additional courses and faculty. This involves organizing multiple weekly class meetings, efficiently allocating courses among educators (for example, two instructors sharing four periods), and using full-time rather than part-time teachers to allow them to focus on students and materials creation. In addition, a lack of commercially available texts means that faculty must create CLIL materials that represent liberal arts topics or introduce the university’s main academic fields. Moreover, multiple versions of educational materials may be needed if students have a wide range of language proficiency. Finally, universities need to stream students by English competency to facilitate language teaching within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and ideally maintain class sizes of 12–20 students for optimal teacher-student engagement.

By April of 2025, the researchers and curriculum designers hope to have course materials and liberal arts content ready to share on Google Drive site with other university English programs in Japan.

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