An Intensive Academic English Class:
Using CLIL Concepts for False Beginners

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Abstract

The following paper briefly outlines the planning of Intensive Academic English Class. The paper shows what considerations were put into the curriculum planning, the model of learning that the class would be based on along with how a team teaching approached was used. All of this with a Content Language and Integrated Learning theme in the background.

A work in progress can describe most teaching situations, and a never ending one at that. This phrase can aptly describe what has taken place in what is an Intensive Academic English class. The class was formulated on the idea that the learner will be acquiring two things; content and language. The paper will proceed as follows; a brief explanation of what the course's objectives are, a description of the students, how the type of material was selected and presented and why. Also, a short rebuttal of what the main stream literature says about the attempting to teach content and language. This paper reports qualitatively what has transpired.

Objectives Of The Course

The objective of the course is to prepare students as if they were to attend tertiary education in a country where the medium of instruction is English. Therefore, a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach was decided upon. Instead of explicitly teaching language, with a focus on form and/or form focused instruction or explicitly teaching functional language, the learners in the classroom are learning both language and content at the same time. Recently, Europe has become more interested in this type of learning due to the economic integration of Europe, allowing more of its citizens to be proficient in more than one language. Importantly CLIL is an

...educational approach in which various language-supportive methodologies are used which lead to a dual-focused form of instruction where attention is givenboth to language and content.

<div align="right">(Coyle,et al,2010:3)</div>

The learners in this course have a fully developed L1, in this case Japanese, so this is not an immersion course. Let move us onto a description of the learners in more detail.

The Learners

So how is this class different from the usual English for Academic purposes? All of the learners are false beginners which means there is a gap between understanding of written and spoken English and their communicative ability. An equal number of male and female students constitute the class. A TOEIC score range of 200 to 350 is what these learners achieved. One of the challenges for the instructors was the difference in majors with some of the learners coming from science departments, with the intention of becoming future junior and high school teachers, while others studied Business and Economics participating within the same class. Knowing what majors these learners were was the initial starting point of the curriculum planning process. This ends the description of the students.

Curriculum Planning Process

What the teachers of the course initially struggled with was what kind of content comprehension given the low proficiency and virtually zero prior knowledge of the subjects taught. The students do receive instruction of these subjects in Japanese which is key.

Following a student centered approach, the materials familiar to the students was chosen for the first semester. There are two reasons for the choice. First, it was necessary for the students to become accustomed to the lecture styles given in English. Second, it gave the students a chance to apply their schema for comprehension of the lectures. The materials presented were those culturally related to the differences between Canada and Japan. For example, differences and similarities in university entrance requirements, different levels of education, and basic geographical similarities and differences. Once the students were accustomed to the lecture format, then materials relative to their academic majors were introduced such basic charts and graphs describing demand and supply curves for example.

Given that one of the goals of the first semester, of a two 15 week twice

a week 90 minutes semester course, is to improve the listening ability of the learners, a lecture format was adopted. The rationale being a lecture style class is what most of these learners would encounter if they went on to tertiary education in an English speaking country.

The structure of a typical lecture is the same regardless of the degree of difficulty or subject. Learners can be successful if they understand the basic structure of a lecture, while the level of sophistication of the content can be adjusted to the proficiency level of the learners. Explicit instruction in how a university lecture is done, allows the learners more focus on trying to understand and acquire the language and the content. This is very important given the low level of proficiency. A basic outline of what occurs in the classroom from the beginning to the end of the class will now be outlined in detail.

The Model of Learning

The lecture combines the familiar PPP (presentation, practice and production) format along with a set of questions that if the learners are able to answer then they have sufficiently comprehended the lecture and can demonstrate this to the lecturers. Given the low proficiency of the learners, it really focused during the curriculum planning process what and how the lectures were to be given in order for comprehension to be demonstrated to the lecturers at the end of the class.

Given the low level of proficiency, how are the lecturers to know that the learners have understood the content of the lectures? The standard way would be to have a set of comprehension questions at the end but in this class, the comprehension questions are given first for the learners to answer. This focused listening allows for the myriad of problems such as Field (2008) identified like decoding and the inconsistent signal recognition. Those questions can activate the students' schema so that the learners can at least predict what they will hear in a lecture. The learners then listen to the lectures, and write notes. This is not as simple as it sounds for low proficient learners.

Presentation Of Material

One of the very first lectures of the course was a detailed lecture on the format of lectures. As with most freshman, most lecture listeners just copy from the blackboard and tune out what the lecturer is actually saying until they have completed their copying and then re-focus onto the actual words of the lecturer. The next step is where the lecturers in this class can really

see whether or not the learners have understood the lecture or not. This is where the team teaching concept is applied.

There are two lecturers in the room. However, only one of the lecturers gives a lecture at any one time. The other lecturer, along with the learners, is sitting amongst the learners and taking notes as well. There is another style of team teaching where the other lecturer should be monitoring the progress of the learners, walking around the room, giving hints, making spot corrections and other standard teaching practices. This would make sure the learners are on task and helping with some problems that the learners are encountering with the goal for the learners to able to comprehend the lecture and then be able to demonstrate that by correctly answering the questions at the beginning of class.

However, the lecturers in this paper felt that during the lecture, this would be a distraction rather than enhancing the comprehension of the lecture. Given the high cognitive load content that low proficient learners have in the first place, how can the learner attend to the task of listening, note taking and the explicit instruction of the second lecturer? Based on the obvious answer of the learner unable to attend to both, explicit teaching and forms of comprehension support are not given.

So going back to the original question, how can the lecturers be confident that the learners understood the lecture? By simply requiring the learners to individually give their answers orally to one of the lecturers at the end of the lecture was decided. For example, in one of the lectures the idea of defined benefit and defined contribution pension plans was presented. Even, for native speakers this is a quite a complex topic. In this class it was vastly simplified but comprehension by the students was able to be demonstrated the learners being re-iterate in their own words while using key that was presented at the beginning of the lecture.

The following request was made of the learners such listing three characteristics of defined benefit and defined contribution pensions. The learners would have to come up with three points for each type of pension plan for a total of six points. The interesting point about this kind of exercise is that the lecturers were not form focused or focused on form but are focused on keywords that are usually presented at the beginning of the lecture, and the learners are allowed to look up unfamiliar vocabulary in their dictionaries before the start of the lecture. The time limit for such dictionary time was 5 minutes.

The learners write down what they have listened to, even if they do not have 100% comprehension. The learners are allowed to have collaboration with other learners, commonly referred to as comparing answers with others, which allows for further note taking then one by one orally presents

the answers to the questions that were originally presented at the class. Now here comes the controversial part.

Once the learner has verbalized the answer to the questions, the lecturer has to make a judgment as to whether or not the answer is acceptable. Having a formed focused answer, a basic template, any deviation from the template will be considered an unsatisfactory answer. These steps (formulate, be assessed and perhaps reformulate) is the last part of the class. This can be quite tiring for both the lecturers and the learners but this constructionist approach to learning is the best way to show to demonstrate some sort of proficiency of understanding of the material.

This last part is unique given that in a traditional lecture, the lecturer rarely has if any time or in some cases, the inclination to check whether there is any understanding at all. The line of reasoning is that the purpose of the lecture is a one way dissemination of knowledge and therefore learners are responsible for their own comprehension, more commonly known as office hours, where learners are given one to one remedial instruction.

The learners who had successfully demonstrated some competence in understanding by being able to answer the questions at the beginning of the lecture, are allowed to help others who have had more difficulty in trying to demonstrate comprehension in L1. After having done this, most times the learners are successful in demonstrating their competence of comprehension, by being able to answer the comprehension questions.

The reason for the exhausting nature of this process is to what degree of grammar mistakes are permitted. If the individual lecturer can comprehend the learner's answer then it is acceptable. Obviously, there is the will to let the student get by with any old answer because everybody wants to leave early. As for the problem with this, the same questions are used on the learners mid and final exams. The learners will repeat verbatim, what they have written in their notes on their written exams. So the more time spent during class time on what is an acceptable answer in class, will result in a higher possibility of achieving a higher score on the learners exam.

Most people perceive lectures as having a high degree of sophisticated content, usually at the native speaker university level. No struggling in comprehension of the second language is assumed while the learners. However,

> **Students cannot develop academic knowledge and skills without access to the language in which that knowledge is embedded, discussed, constructed, or evaluated. Nor can they acquire academic language skills in a context devoid of [academic] content.**   (Crandall,1994:256)

There was no dumbing down of the material. Quite the contrary, given the lower proficiency of the material had to be presented and lectured by the lecturers without any extraneous materials which often accompanies many lectures. Severely focused, a strict format and allowing the PPP format to guide the lecture format as the model of learning, shows that even false beginners can receive benefits from an CLIL course.

In essence, like numerous universities and colleges in the English speaking parts of North America, there is a huge drive to recruit foreign students for a variety of reasons, primarily financial. These are commonly referred to as pathway courses. These courses are designed to help lower proficient learners of English be able to enter and thrive in a typical English speaking lecture style classes. The interesting aspect of these pathway courses are that there is explicit instruction in language. This paper described what, in another part of the world, would be called a pathway course for false beginners.

Works Cited

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