

[Article]

# Student Attitudes to CLIL Lessons Utilising a Problem-based Approach to English Language Education at University in Japan

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## Abstract

Globalising forces in recent times have made the acquisition of global communication language skills more important than ever before. In Japan, as in many cases elsewhere, English has emerged as the foreign language most taught and studied. However, acquisition of English to a high level of fluency has remained elusive for many learners. This paper reports on a study which aimed to discover if content and language integrated approaches would influence the attitudes of low-proficiency students to the study and learning in English language education in university. In order to ameliorate the mismatch between the degree of complexity and specialisation of university level courses and the English proficiency of students, two multi-week EFL projects, including the adoption of problem-based learning activities, were undertaken. Questionnaires were administered prior to and at the completion of the projects. The implications of the results of the questionnaires for university-level English language education are discussed, and future directions for related research are suggested.

## Key Words

English language education, EFL, Japan, CLIL, PBL, university, motivation

## I Introduction

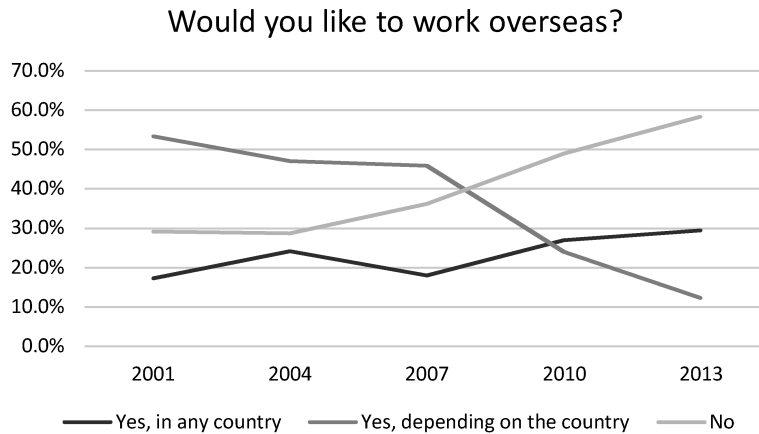
In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalising forces and the unprecedented mobility of capital, goods and people across borders requires the ability to interact in a variety of inter-cultural and cross-cultural scenarios. English has emerged in this environment as the language most used in a great many global settings (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006), meaning that developing communication skills in English is now also becoming a necessity for a growing number of the world's people.

As is the case elsewhere, this need for high-level English language skills is keenly felt in Japan. Without international trade, Japan would almost certainly be unable to continue to exist in its current state. For example, imports of the raw materials and energy that Japan requires to drive its export based economy, such as iron ore, coal, gas and oil all exceed 90%. Japan now imports more fossil fuels than any country other than China (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2013). As English is the main language of international trade and business interaction, it is clear that Japan requires citizens with English language skills in a variety of domains. However, notwithstanding the huge amount of time and resources devoted to English language education in recent decades, Japanese test takers are usually very near the bottom in scores on international tests of English, like IELTS or TOEFL (IELTS, 2011; ETS, 2014). Consequently, business leaders in Japan have long called for better English language skills and improvements in English language education, which is commonly felt to under-prepare graduates to work in a globalised world (Keidanren, 2000, 2013).

One oft cited explanation for this situation is the teaching methodology employed by teachers of English in Japan, the so-called *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) approach. Traditionally, Japanese English language education has tended to be teacher centred and lay great importance on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and the ability to translate, often de-contextualised, sentences between English and Japanese for the purposes of taking entrance examinations to higher levels of education (e.g. Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Guest, 2000; Hino, 1988; Imamura, 1978; Taguchi, 2005). Success in these examinations is widely believed to exert a great deal of influence on future employment prospects (e.g. Nakane, 1984; Reischauer, 1977; Sugimoto, 2010; Takahashi, 2004). Consequently, Japanese pupils and students are often given little opportunity to engage with the language in a communicative way, tend to be passive in class and have great difficulty in expressing opinions in English (Shimizu, 2006; Turner & Hiraga, 1996).

This impacts on Japan's international presence diplomatically and in the business world, where Japan has a low international profile relative to the size of its economy. For example, Japan provides the second largest amount of funding to the UN, after the USA, but finds itself severely underrepresented in UN bodies (Kameda, 2015; Katsuma, n.d.). There are also few multilinguals in Japanese corporations (Okabe, 2009). Simultaneously, a trend towards introversion has become evident in recent years in Japan. Fewer students are studying in foreign countries than in the past (Dujarric & Takenaka, 2014; IIE, 2015; Tanikawa, 2011), and the number of newly employed company workers unwilling to work abroad has also been increasing (see Figure 1). A lack of confidence in language skills was one of the main reasons cited for this, and more than half of those surveyed in 2013 expressed dissatisfaction with the English language education they had received in their schooling (Sanno Institute of Management, 2013). This raises two other important facets of second language acquisition: learner satisfaction or enjoyment, and motivation.

Motivation has long been recognised as an important determiner in achievement in second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 1985). The motivation of Japanese learners in English language classes has been considered a problematic issue for some time (Berwick &



**Figure 1. New company employees' attitudes to working abroad.**

(Source: Sanno Institute of Management, 2013)

Ross, 1989; Brown, 2004; Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001), and in recent years demotivation among Japanese learners of English has also become a topic of research (Kikuchi, 2013; Ushioda, 2013). Typically the kinds of things that demotivate pupils relate to the examination system, teaching methodologies and teachers themselves.

For some secondary school learners, the competitive entrance examinations for upper secondary school and university represent a clear form of instrumental motivation, however once they are completed and students enter university this form of motivation ceases to exist. For many other pupils, the motivating value of preparation for examinations they will not take or have little chance of passing may be at best limited or even demotivating. And despite there being no need to study and prepare for entrance examinations after students enter universities, tertiary-level English language classes often mirror those in secondary school, with teacher-centred lessons focussed on grammar and translation (Hino, 1988; Humphries & Burns 2015; Robson, 2003), which may appear to students as being without goals that have meaning for them. The implications of this for student motivation and demotivation are clear (Berwick & Ross, 1989). A major difference between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts is the amount of exposure to the target language and to native speakers. In ESL contexts, learners are typically residing in a country where English is the main, or an important, language which may open doors to social and economic advancement. In an EFL context, such as Japan, opportunities for using the language outside the classroom are limited, which likely makes a difference in the level of motivation of learners (Dörnyei, 1990). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has attempted to address the perceived problems in English language education, including motivation, with a number of changes to curriculum guidelines. Most recently, there have been calls for improvements which raise motivation and cultural awareness in order to aid in the development of 'global citizens' (MEXT, 2011). Muñoz

(2007) argues that traditional language teaching methodologies, of the kind seen in many Japanese EFL classrooms, lacks the kind of communicative input and output which stimulates motivation in learners. Unfortunately, notwithstanding recommendations from MEXT and the implementation of various initiatives and programmes by the central government, there appears to have been little change in the overall situation regarding teaching practice in Japan's secondary schools (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Consequently, creating situations in university classrooms that promote student engagement, enjoyment and motivation is of great importance, as attempting to mimic real world communicative needs in English classes may offer students an alternative source of motivation.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an approach in which a second language and a content subject, such as history, maths or geography, are taught simultaneously, with both being given more or less equal focus and attention, according to learner needs at any given stage of the learning process. Consequently, learners are likely to consider the foreign language used, English in the Japanese context, to be as important as the curricula subject being taught (Coyle et al., 2011), and this is believed to enhance student motivation. However, CLIL 'differs from simple English-medium education in that the learner is not necessarily expected to have the English proficiency required to cope with the subject before beginning study' (Graddol, 2006: 86). Such a learning environment will as a matter of course provide learners with authentic content input and present them with more of a challenge than traditional approaches, which tend to focus solely on linguistic aspects of the language. According to Eurydice (2006, p. 22), the aims of CLIL in Europe are:

- preparing pupils for life in a more internationalised society and offering them better job prospects on the labour market (socio-economic objectives);
- conveying to pupils values of tolerance and respect vis-à-vis other cultures, through the use of the CLIL target language (socio-cultural objectives);
- enabling pupils to develop:
  - language skills which emphasise effective communication, motivating pupils to learn languages by using them for real practical purposes (linguistic objectives);
  - subject-related knowledge and learning ability, stimulating the assimilation of subject matter by means of a different and innovative approach (educational objectives).

These aims closely reflect the stated aims of MEXT for English language learning in Japan (MEXT, 2011, 2014), making CLIL a candidate for adoption by EFL practitioners. Studies in many different contexts have shown enhanced student interest in learning a foreign language when engaged in CLIL approaches (for example, Coyle, 2003; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009; Lasagabaster, 2011; Seikkula-Leino, 2007; Weisemes, 2009).

However, despite at least six years of formal English language education in secondary school, many university students in Japan still have little more than rudimentary English language skills (Negishi & Tono, 2014). The high-level and specialised nature of subject content at the university level makes using a conventional CLIL approach problematic for

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such students. Additionally, many universities are ill prepared to provide these kinds of classes in terms of employing bilingual faculty and staff (Parsons & Walker, 2014). Employing a problem-based learning (PBL) has the potential to mitigate this issue, by offering educators the opportunity to create language learning tasks that are in the realm of what happens in the real world (Abdullah, 1998) and appropriate to the linguistic ability of students, providing students with life-like scenarios in which to use English without recourse to the linguistically complex content subjects typically on offer in university curricula.

PBL is 'a pedagogical methodology requiring learners to take an active role in the construction of knowledge by developing metacognitive learning strategies, working in small groups, and solving realistic ill-structured problems' (Neville and Britt, 2007). Unlike traditional language teaching approaches in Japan, which tend to focus on discreet 'right-or-wrong' questions of grammatical knowledge, PBL centres on complex problems that do not have a single clear, correct answer.

Typically, students assume responsibility for their own learning by first engaging with a problem using the knowledge they currently possess, and then collaborating in groups to determine what they need to learn or what information they need to attain in order to solve the problem. Savery (2006) claims that learner motivation increases when learners take responsibility for finding solutions to a problem in this way. The role of the teacher is to act as a facilitator in the learning process, rather than as the all-knowing provider of knowledge (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Savery, 2006). Students interact with one another to establish what knowledge they have in common, decipher what differences in understanding may exist and negotiate with each other so that the group can decide on an agreed course of action (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). To this end, it is essential that learners engage in reflective conversations with their co-learners to try to find common ground in their knowledge and experiences and make decisions on the best course of action.

In short, PBL presents students with an opportunity to engage in exactly the kinds of behaviours that will most likely be expected of them when they find themselves employed in the work-place after graduating from university: sharing information and communicating effectively with colleagues and customers. Thus, an important and valuable aspect of PBL that students can draw upon in their future working lives is that they must learn how to function as part of a team and collaborate with others.

## II Context and Research Questions

The context for this study encompasses students in English-language classes at a private university in Japan. As is commonly the case for the great majority of students in Japan, the participants in this study must attain a certain number of credits in a foreign language to be eligible for graduation. While English is not compulsory, it is the language chosen by slightly more than 70% of students at the institution, most of whom fit Negishi and Tono's (2014) description of the English language proficiency of the majority of Japanese people (80% non-users or at A1/A2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

We were interested to learn whether such students would find a content-rich, task-based approach to English language learning appealing or meaningful. In short, an attempt was made to understand if there was a way of improving student motivation for learners of this profile by applying PBL scenarios to a CLIL-type approach to language learning classes.

Specifically, the following research questions were posed:

1. Will students find a CLIL learning environment more enjoyable than a traditional learning environment?
2. Given Japanese students' traditional lack of motivation in English language classes, does a CLIL approach better reflect their learning desires than a traditional approach?
3. Does experience in a CLIL learning environment alter students' affective response to the use of English?

### III Methodology

The study focussed on first-year students enrolled in a business-oriented faculty of a private university in Japan who, though they will not major in English, must take a foreign language as a graduation requirement. The overwhelming majority of students in this environment are well aware of the importance of English language skills in the modern world, but have a generally negative attitude towards the study of English (Parsons & Iwasaki, 2008). As is the case in many universities in Japan, students in this environment take two 90-minute English classes per week. English A, which is taught by a native speaking teacher of English, focusses more on developing students listening and speaking skills, and English B, which is taught by a Japanese teacher of English, and focusses more on developing reading and writing skills, although there is obviously some overlap between the two classes.

Students were administered two questionnaires. One, which aimed to gain an understanding of their confidence in using English in certain situations, was administered prior to beginning the CLIL-type classes. 87 students responded to the first questionnaire. The second questionnaire, which aimed to understand student confidence in using English and impressions of the CLIL-type classes, was administered at the end of the study period. A total of 79 students responded to the second questionnaire. All except two (who had not attended secondary school) had done a minimum of six years of formal English language study. All students (except one who was 21, a rarity in most Japanese universities) were 18 or 19 years of age at the beginning of the study.

Classes in English B followed a traditional style of EFL teaching using a textbook with four-skills focus of a kind typically used in many Japanese universities. Students in English

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the sample.

	Total	Male	Female
Questionnaire 1	87	52	35
Questionnaire 2	79	48	31

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A were given CLIL-type lessons with a teaching approach that was problem-based, project oriented and output driven. In groups, students undertook two projects of several weeks duration. The first was based on food and nutrition, designed to increase knowledge of food groups and health through nutrition and the dietary habits of different cultural groups around the world. The second project (based on a topic in the text related to making travel plans) built on the first by introducing a family with different cultural interests and health related issues. Students were required to design a travel itinerary which accommodated the various, sometimes conflicting, needs and desires of the family members, including provisions for wheel-chair access and dietary health requirements. At the end of each project, groups presented their results of their work to the entire class for evaluation and feedback, making students an integral part of the learning process by encouraging them to work as groups to find solutions to problems and become involved in assessment.

These two topics were selected for adaption to CLIL and PBL-type lessons for two reasons. The first was a practical consideration. These topics were being introduced, albeit in a traditional way, in English B classes and therefore it was expected that students would be able to enjoy a sense of continuity in their English language study. While the projects took their starting point from the text used in English B, they were highly adapted to increase the amount and the complexity of the content. The second, and more important reason, was to encourage greater interaction among students and in an attempt to find ways of applying English language learning to real-world situations. This gave students a chance to engage with the English language through the setting of concrete, comprehensible goals, as opposed to language learning for testing purposes or merely as a means of fulfilling the requirements of a text-based syllabus.

It was expected that this approach would prove challenging for these students, so making use of activities designed to assist them in their learning was of paramount importance. In both CLIL and PBL, scaffolding of activities is considered a crucial and integral part of the learning process. Ertmore and Simons, (2006) define scaffolding as a way of supporting learners in 'complex and unfamiliar environments' and state that scaffolds can refer to 'the tools, strategies, or guides' that allow learners to reach higher levels of understanding and performance that they could not possibly achieve on their own. Saye and Brush (2002, p. 82) classify most scaffolds as either 'hard' or 'soft'. Hard scaffolds are those that can be prepared and planned in advance when the teacher can identify typical difficulties that the student might have. In contrast, soft scaffolds are 'dynamic and situational', requiring teachers to constantly analyse the understanding of students and provide appropriate support depending on student responses.

In the present study, scaffolding mainly took the form of concept and vocabulary building. For many, though not all, students, the basic concepts relating to nutrition were familiar to some degree, but the related English vocabulary was not. Examples of analyses of dishes and diets from different cultures were provided and students were given opportunities to discuss their progress with teachers, who were able then to provide immediate interventions where required. In this way a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' scaffolds were used throughout the



period of the study.

#### IV Results

With regard to Research Question 1 (Will students find a CLIL learning environment more enjoyable than a traditional learning environment?), as might be expected in an educational environment in which pressure to perform in examinations increases over time, students reported that enjoyment of their English language study experiences prior to entering university had decreased significantly across the three levels of schooling in which English language education was encountered (see Figure 2). This lack of enjoyment is certainly one of the key reasons for the apparent lack of interest in learning foreign languages and passive behaviour in university classes by Japanese students, most likely leading to a lack of engagement and lower motivation. The most common reason cited by students for their disenchantment was the difficulty of English language classes. This may represent a ‘catch-all’ description for a number of interrelated issues pupils often perceive in their learning experiences, such as dissatisfaction with teachers, teaching methods and materials, and other reasons (Kikuchi, 2013).

With regard to their learning experiences in university, students indicated a clear difference in their perceptions of enjoyment and usefulness between English A and English B classes (see Figure 3). Compared to English B, which followed a traditional, textbook-based approach, English A classes, which adopted a CLIL and PBL approach were considered both more enjoyable (36.8% and 87.2%, respectively) and more useful (70.9% and 88.6% respectively). The relatively common response of finding English B neither particularly enjoyable nor unenjoyable may reflect familiarity with the approach. It may simply be what many students are accustomed to and consequently elicit no particularly strong emotion.

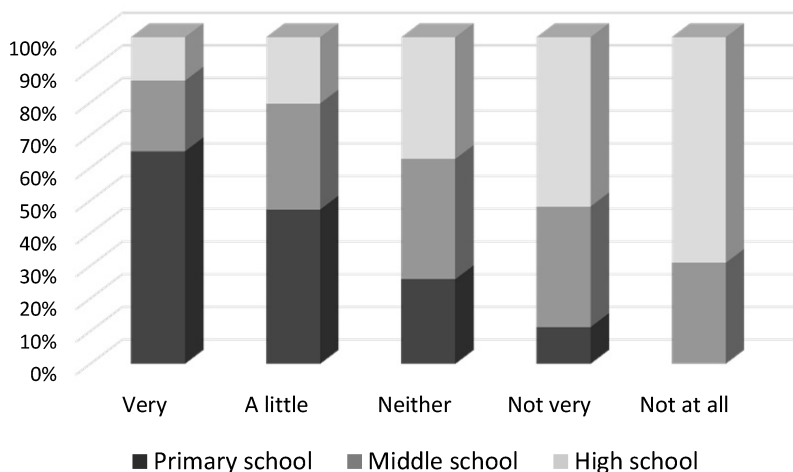


Figure 2. Were English classes at school enjoyable?



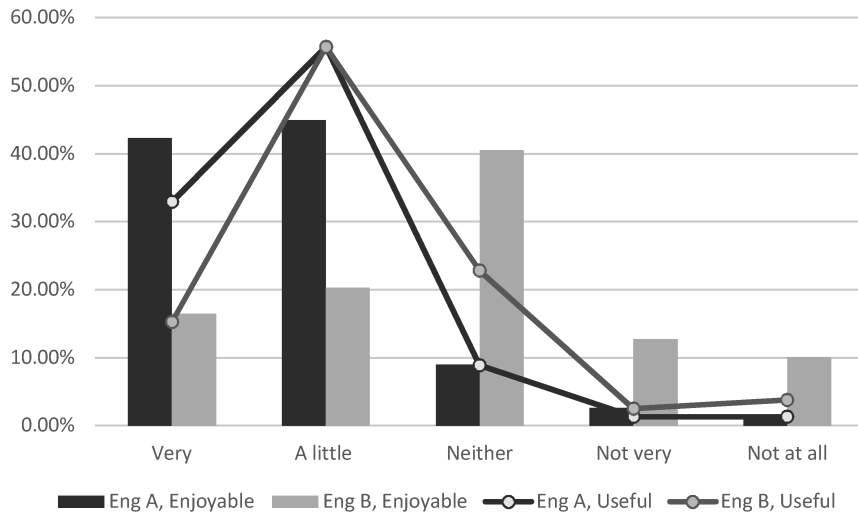


Figure 3. Have university English classes been enjoyable?

Further, when asked to compare English A lessons to their previous English study experiences, 74.7% of students responded that they had found the CLIL type classes in English A better or much better. Only 6.3% responded negatively to this question.

With regard to Research Question 2 (Given Japanese students’ traditional lack of motivation in English language classes, does a CLIL approach better reflect their learning desires than a traditional approach?), students appear to evaluate CLIL lessons as more closely aligned to their preferred mode of learning in class than a traditional teaching approach. In the first questionnaire, students were asked to rank the skill they most wanted to improve at university. Responses were in the following order: 47% wanted to improve their speaking skills most; 29% wanted to improve listening skills most; 12% wanted to improve their reading skills most; and a further 12% wanted to improve their writing skills most. When asked in Questionnaire 2 what they felt the aims of English A and English B were, the three top responses for English A were communication, speaking/listening; and expressing one’s opinion. The three top responses for English B were reading/writing; grammar; and communication. As such, the perceived aims of the CLIL lessons in English A better reflect students’ desires than do the traditional approaches used in English B classes.

Some explanation for the differences in student enjoyment may also be found in the teaching styles employed in the different classes. Students expressed a clear preference for learning in groups or in pairs rather than alone, but they also report that the most common mode of learning in English B, the traditional approach to EFL, was alone, while the most common mode of learning in the CLIL lessons in English A was in groups (see Figure 4).

Interestingly, despite considering English A (nominally focussed on speaking and listening) classes as being more enjoyable and more useful than English B (nominally focussed on reading and writing), results for student perceptions of improvements in the four macro-skills

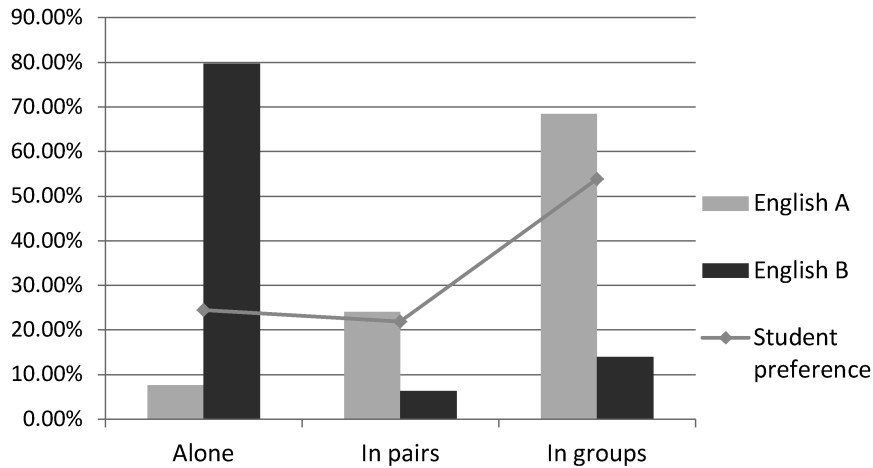


Figure 4. Learning arrangements in English classes.

were quite similar. In the skills more focussed on in English A, 82.3% felt their speaking had improved and 68.4% felt their listening had improved during the period of the study. For the skills more focussed on in English B classes, 75.9% felt their reading skills had improved and 68.4% felt their writing had improved.

With regard to Research Question 3 (Does experience in a CLIL learning environment alter students' affective response to the use of English?), students were asked in both questionnaires how they would feel if required to use English in certain situations (specifically, with other students in pairs or in groups during class, in front of the class, in formal meeting situations, or with a foreigner on the street). Students were able to give multiple responses to these questions, in order to reflect the possibility of having a number of different emotions in a given situation. By far the most common response in each questionnaire was 'nervous'. However, there was a marked increase in the number of students expressing positive orientations to these situations after the completion of the CLIL and PBL lessons.

In the scenario of speaking in English with classmates during class, the number of positive responses more than doubled from eight to seventeen (9.2% to 20.8%) (see Figure 5a). In the scenario of being required to speak in English in front of their class, positive responses increased five-fold, from two to ten (2.2% to 12.7%) (see Figure 5b). In the scenario of being required to speak in English in a formal situation, the increase in positive responses was ten-fold, from one to ten (1.1% to 12.6%) (see Figure 5c). And in the scenario of being required to speak to a foreigner on the street, there was an increase in positive responses from thirteen to twenty four (15.1% to 30.4%) (see Figure 5d).

Certainly, the change in number is quite modest, but as a percentage it is large, indicating more comfort in using English for students. On the other hand, and contrary to expectation, the percentage of students saying they would feel nervous increased in each scenario

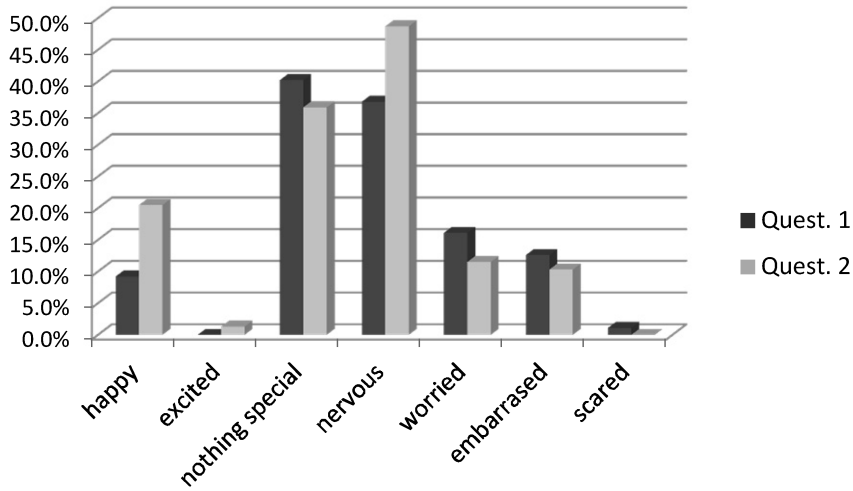


Figure 5a. Feelings about speaking English with other students during class.

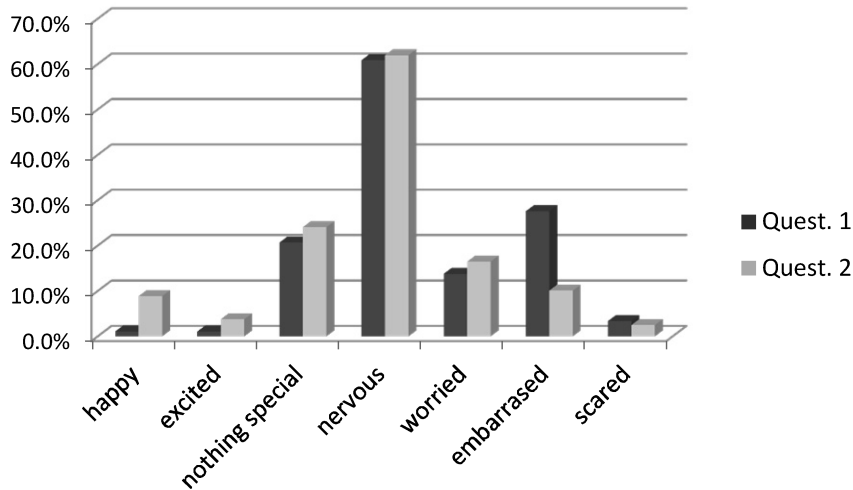


Figure 5b. Feelings about speaking English in front of the class.

from the first to the second questionnaire. This should be addressed in future research to understand the reasons for what appears on the surface to be something of a paradox.

Consequently, we believe that there is a generally affirmative response to Research Question 1, which asked if students would find a CLIL learning environment more enjoyable than a traditional learning environment. We believe there is also an affirmative answer to Research Question 2, which asked if a CLIL approach better reflect their learning desires than a traditional approach, with the caveat that student perceptions of improvement in the

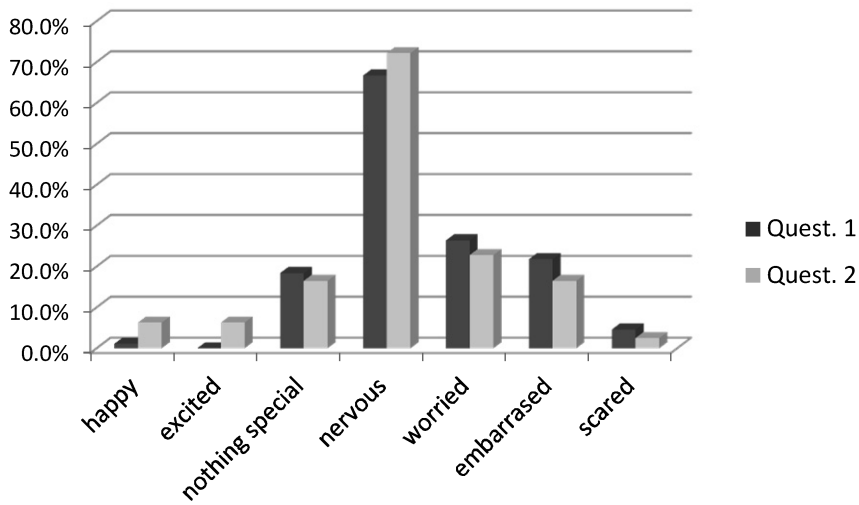


Figure 5c. Feelings about speaking English in a formal situation.

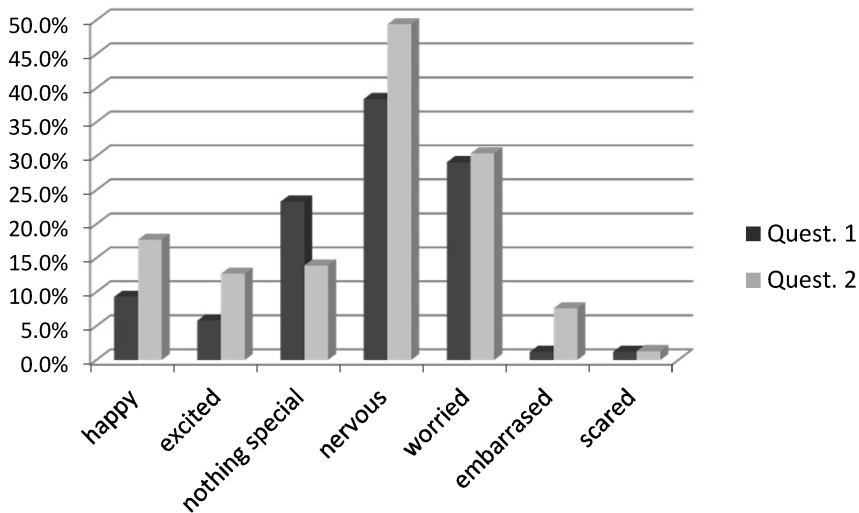


Figure 5d. Feelings about speaking to a foreigner in the street.

four macro-skills are quite similar. More research is required to understand this result more clearly. The response to Research Question 3, which asked if experience in a CLIL learning environment would alter students' affective response to the use of English, is more ambiguous. While the number of positive responses increased, feelings of nervousness also increased.

## V Implications for University English Language Education in Japan

The results of this study present some issues for consideration by practitioners of English language education in Japan. Engaging students in classroom learning experiences which are in accordance with students' own desires appears to improve students' impressions of their English learning. Students in this study indicated a preference for interaction with their classmates through group and pair work, which was the general mode of classroom arrangement in English A classes. Although not specifically addressed in the questionnaire, some students verbally expressed interest in the concept of using cooperative group work in finding a solution to a social problem. This would likely be a fascinating topic for future research.

The majority of students also expressed a hope for improvement in their speaking and listening skills. Again, this was more reflected in student perceptions of their learning experiences in English A than in English B. This translated into students expressing a positive impression of English A classes in comparison with English B, and their earlier English learning experiences.

A further point of interest to emerge from this study, and which is worthy of consideration, is the belief expressed by students that English A classes were more useful to them than English B classes. As has been noted, secondary school English classes tend to emphasise mastery of grammar and translation skills at the expense of more communicative skills. Interpersonal communication is among the most important skills demanded in the new globalising environment that these students will encounter when they enter the workforce, and are among the skills in improvements are being called for by various sectors of society, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011, 2014). Students themselves also clearly would like to improve their communication skills, but often find that their university classes replicate the kinds of grammar and translation based, test-oriented English learning experiences of their secondary schooling. This study indicates that student interest and enjoyment can be activated by engaging them in structured problem solving activities which provide opportunities to learn and use English.

Another interesting facet to emerge from the implementation of these CLIL/PBL activities was a nascent sense of empowerment in students. Towards the end of the study period, a number of students commented that they liked feeling that they were in control of what they were learning. One student stated, 'I am satisfied that I do not have to wait for you (the teacher) to tell me what to do. I feel as if I have done most of it by myself'. Glasser and Wubbolding (1995, p. 294) claim that 'human beings seek power in the form of achievement, competence and accomplishment'. In an interview with Brandt (1998, p. 40), William Glasser remarked that students who are not in a position to say 'I'm at least a little bit important' are unlikely to work hard to remedy that situation. Glasser argued that students in the USA who could not gain a sense of being important from home needed to get this from their schools. Ironically, he cites homogenous cultures like those of Japan as being better at providing this support from home. However, changes in Japanese society may mean that

this home support is no longer as strong as it once was. Figures from an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report show Japan has the sixth highest level of relative poverty, as well as the highest level of relative poverty (60%) for working single-parents among OECD countries (OECD, 2013). Glasser, 1965 (cited in Tauber, 2007, p. 184) claims that the need for power can be addressed through the use of teams or groups in schools. Thus sport, drama, and model United Nation type activities can help students feel both a sense of belonging and power via the collective strength in the team. In light of the data on poverty from the OECD report cited above, it would seem that Japanese students may more than ever need to rely on educators to help them achieve feelings of involvement and importance through their studies, particularly by facilitating the use of teams or groups in classes to empower their students and create improved opportunities for learning.

## VI Conclusion

This study broadly indicates positive results in terms of student attitudes towards English language classes using a CLIL approach with problem-based learning projects. Students appear to find it more stimulating and motivating to study and learn in groups, than alone, and appear to find content-rich project learning more motivating than traditional approaches. However, some short-comings in the nature of the study should be noted. This was a small-scale study conducted at a single university. A broader-based study, encompassing various contexts in teaching and learning environments would likely give more robust results.

Further research should also be conducted to understand students' reported feelings of nervousness in using English. While this is to some extent a natural reaction, attempts to identify underlying causes ought to be made to discover if these feelings can be reduced.

Further research should also be conducted to understand various types of student motivation in the settings described in this study. Attitudes and motivation in language education are complex and research specifically designed to understand different types of motivation, such as the instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation of these students, should be a priority for future research.

Additionally, understanding and identifying the types of content lessons that are most likely to motivate students in their studies would be beneficial to both teachers and learners.

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