

# **Interdisciplinary Course Design for CLIL**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the process and outcomes of a collaboratively designed Introduction to Religion Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) course for first-year students at a private university in Japan. The authors (a Philosophy / Religion instructor and an English instructor) aim to provide a case study and model for both new and experienced language and content teachers who may be approaching integrated team-taught courses for the first time.

**Keywords:** CLIL, course design, team-teaching

## **Introduction**

Course design, just like curriculum design, has developed dramatically over the last decades. Johnson (1990) in his book "The Second Language Curriculum," observes that curriculum design "has evolved from a focus on content and methodology only (syllabus design), to a broader focus that includes needs assessment, instructional design, teacher training, program management and evaluation." This holds true for course design as well. Most individual teachers today do not just select a textbook and lecture from it in their courses. They need to consider student needs, course objectives, as well as course monitoring and evaluation because their role in the classroom has changed. Teachers are now seen as mediators between the course material and the students, as opposed to dispensers of knowledge. In both language teaching and

instruction of a subject matter other than language, there is a trend of focusing on student-centered teaching and learning practices.

Regarding language teaching, this shift from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom was marked by the advent of the communicative teaching method (CT). Communicative teaching, in turn, has several different approaches, starting with the natural approach (based on Second Language Acquisition theories) or the functional approach (emphasizing language functions), the immersion approach (where content and language are merged, such as CLIL and EMI) or the task-based approach and so on. Therefore, course design for language classes usually begins with the selection of one approach, and, based on that approach, continues with the selection of goals, classroom methodology and materials (Yalden, 1991).

Student-centered approaches are also considered when teaching content other than language. The Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence, for instance, recommends starting the design of a course by setting outcomes, creating a syllabus, flipping the classroom (blended learning), considering all student needs, evaluating and redesigning the course.

As course design requirements are very similar for both language and content instructors, it looks as if, in theory, there will not be differences impossible to overcome when a language teacher and a content teacher may need to create and teach a course together. In reality, though, as Stewart (2005) writes, it is not that easy to create an effective partnership. Team teaching can mean peer support and professional development, but it can also become a sensitive issue when two teachers who do not know much about each other's field of expertise are asked to teach the same course together. Sandholtz (2000) describes three different types of team teaching: 1) in which teachers are loosely responsible for parts of a course, 2) where course design is done

together, but teaching is separate and finally, type 3) where planning, instruction, and evaluation are all done together.

Type 3 is the case introduced in this paper, which discusses the particular team teaching arrangement of the authors and the process they followed in designing, teaching, evaluating, and redesigning an Introduction to Religion course taught in English to non-native speakers of English in an EFL context.

CLIL or Content and Language Integrated Learning is a teaching method that was developed originally in Canada for immersion programs and then spread throughout Europe, where universities, mainly, started to offer more courses for international students. In CLIL classes students learn content through an L2 target language while focusing on improving both understanding of the content and the target language at the same time. CLIL, therefore, has a dual focus. According to Dale & Tanner (2012), CLIL can be placed on a continuum between CBLT (content-based language teaching) and immersion. In CBLT the aim is to teach language in context; therefore, the language only is assessed and feedback is related to language support only. Immersion, on the other hand, focuses completely on teaching content with little or no attention paid to the language.

The instructors of the course under scrutiny in this paper shared the understanding that the course to be designed would be a CLIL type course, aimed at supporting both understanding of the content and development of the language of course takers.

## **Course Design – The Steps**

The course design process followed several steps including (1) defining and combining content and language objectives, (2) selecting content and deciding the course format, (3) analyzing content and redefining language objectives, (4) designing language support material, (5) teaching and monitoring, (6) making adjustments and, finally, (7) evaluating.

## **1) Defining and Combining Content and Language Objectives**

As this was an Introduction to Religion course for first-year students, the question was what to select from the religion field that would be relevant, and appropriately challenging for our students. The Religion instructor decided to make the course an introduction to eight major world religions. Regarding the English language, the general objective at this point was to support understanding of new concepts and language in the context of world religions.

## **2) Selecting Content and Deciding the Course Format**

The second step involved selecting the content and agreeing on a format that could be applied throughout the course. The Religion instructor created the first reading material as a template for each of the eight units or modules. After applying a time frame to this sample and cross-referencing with the semester schedule, the instructors decided to divide the course into seven chapters, with two of the religions to be introduced in the same chapter. For the EFL instructor, this process was different from previous experience with course design. The language instructor did not have a choice in the selection of content and did not have expertise in this content. Therefore, there was a need for the EFL teacher to revise existing background knowledge of the content or learn the content as new knowledge. Although time-consuming and possibly even challenging, this situation presents a pedagogical advantage. It put the EFL

instructor in a position similar to the students', thus leading to increased empathy and a better chance of predicting student needs.

### **3) Analyzing Content and Redefining Language Objectives**

To create the first sample of language support material, the EFL instructor had to analyze the content and redefine or refine language objectives. Therefore, the decision was made to provide support for developing two types of skills, namely vocabulary and listening. Vocabulary development was chosen as a goal because, although adapted after authentic texts, the reading material was still very challenging for first-year students. The reading material was processed using a free online lexical frequency profiling tool ([www.lextutor.ca](http://www.lextutor.ca)), and it was found that only 81% of the vocabulary belonged to the K1 and K2 lists (K1: first most frequent 1,000 words; K2: second most frequent 1,00 words). The 81% score meant that students would probably need to check a dictionary for close to 20% of the text, or every five words, and they would have had to study approximately 150 difficult words (not on the K1 and K2 lists) used in a total of approximately 300 instances for this particular material.

These findings were shared with the content teaching partner who agreed to rewrite some sections of the text while paying attention to the vocabulary used. The objective was not to overuse academic words and to try to repeat keywords or key concepts so that they could be recycled and mastered.

This process, in turn, led to the idea of developing all units around seven main, common concepts, so it resulted in redefining objectives for content as well. The result was a course divided into seven units, with reading materials organized around seven key concepts. This

template was expected to help students navigate through their reading material easier while pointing out conceptual similarities and differences across the eight world religions.

#### **4) Designing Language Support Material**

This step involved designing the language support material and formatting it. New features were added to the design of the reading material to support vocabulary development. One was to insert a vocabulary box with key words after each paragraph of text, thus integrating vocabulary study and reading. The aim was to draw attention to those words and encourage the students to use a dictionary to confirm their meaning. Secondly, content comprehension questions intended to assess students' understanding of the material newly introduced, and their ability to write and later speak about it were moved below the vocabulary box, so that students would try to use the new vocabulary when answering the questions. Finally, in the second run of the course, a Quizlet ([www.quizlet.com](http://www.quizlet.com)) class was set up and vocabulary lists were created for each unit. The students enrolled in the online Quizlet class and used the available array of functions to study each list. Completion of the Quizlet list study was a requirement for one of the language assessment components of the course.

To address the development of listening skills, the instructors searched for and collected short video materials to complement the readings that could be used in class or assigned as homework. Short animated stories created originally for young native speakers of English were selected, one for each unit. The EFL instructor transcribed these 7- 15 minute long videos and created English subtitles for each. Two types of activities were added to the videos. One was a fill-in-the-gap language activity that required the students to listen and write down the missing sections of the subtitle. The second activity was comprehension questions related to the content

of the video that the students could choose to complete for bonus points. Additionally, in the end-of-unit quiz assessment, one question was always related to the video.

Below are screenshots of one section of the first unit reading handout and the complementary video assignment posted to the Moodle learning management system.



### ☪ Sacredness

Because Brahman is everywhere and in everything, in one respect everything can be seen as sacred in Hinduism. Many Hindus worship particular deities that are seen as manifestations of Brahman; statues of these deities are seen as sacred and are treated very respectfully. In temples the image of the god is often bathed, dressed, and even perhaps put to rest at night in different bed clothes.

IN ONE RESPECT (expr.) PARTICULAR (adj.) TREAT (v) BATHE (v) BED CLOTHES (n)
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Questions:

1. Explain the concept of the sacred.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is sacred in Hinduism? How is that similar or different from what you consider sacred?

## Hinduism

 1 Hinduism Unit Text

 Hinduism video

Watch the video and write down the missing subtitles in a list from 1 to 16.



A dilemma that the EFL teacher had to face was whether to suggest editing the text so as to lower its lexical difficulty closer to the students' level, or to try to find ways to support the students and help them develop not only language skills but also more general learning skills. As a result, less editing and more language support was offered. This decision was partly based on previous teaching experience at the same college that showed that students in more demanding courses worked harder and, as a result, made more visible progress compared to students in more lenient courses, provided that the appropriate type and amount of support be offered.



## **5) Teaching and Monitoring**

Most of the course materials were created before the beginning of the term, so the instructors started using them in class and monitoring to see possible issues, and outcomes. The instructors taught each class session as a team, dividing time between content-related and language-related activities. After each class, the instructors met face-to-face or shared observations through e-mail. Several issues were identified, discussed and addressed throughout the course, and adjustments were made as shown below.

## **6) Making Adjustments**

The adjustments made refer to issues such as class management, volume of material and methods to use it, material design, assessment, and student feedback.

Although the instructors had trimmed down the material to what it seemed to them the 'bare minimum,' class sessions proved to be too short to allow covering as much as originally planned. Therefore, by taking a flipped class approach, reading was assigned as preparation before coming to class, opening class time to group discussions and deeper interpretation of the concepts covered in the reading material.

It was intended originally for videos to be shown and discussed in class. However, due to the lack of equipment such as big screens or individual monitors, not all students were able to see or hear the videos well, so these were assigned as homework too, together with the complementary fill-in-the-gaps and comprehension check activities.

The design of the handouts changed slightly as well. The vocabulary box did not originally have space for the students to write any notes inside and was designed to draw

attention to the words. As students were observed writing notes in that small space, the box was later enlarged to give that option.

The biggest change that was made to assessment was trying to incorporate all the assignments, activities, and tests. Without the incentive that a score represents, very few students were willing to put in the necessary effort to engage with the materials provided or participate in class activities.

Finally, individual support for students was offered during office hours, when feedback from students was also collected. An end-of-semester online survey provided additional insight into the students' opinions of the course, which led to further improvements.

## **7) Evaluation**

At the end of the semester, students participated in a survey and answered questions related to the course format, content, and delivery, as well as their performance in the course. Results show that, overall, students found the course goals and materials challenging but achievable. They also reported self-perceived improvements in listening, reading and vocabulary skills, and having acquired the ability to find not only similarities and differences between religions but also connections between religion and daily life.

The survey questions were divided into five different categories: interest in the subject, confidence, intent to improve, preferred class activities and effort/ time. To determine whether the course scores for video assignments, vocabulary/ Quizlet assignments, unit quizzes and final exams correlated in any way with the students' answers on the survey, Rasch statistical analysis was conducted. The only significant correlation found was between video assignment scores and

the value of the self-reported effort/ time item on the survey. The students' self-reported effort/time explains 41% of the variance in video assignment scores.

Coefficients	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
interest.in.the.subject	15.6894	-1.466	0.1632
confidence	6.6001	0.808	0.4317
intent.to.improve	7.8717	0.340	0.7388
preferred.activities	3.1483	-0.308	0.7621
effort.time	26.9890	2.479	0.0255 *
Multiple R-squared: 0.4103, Adjusted R-squared: 0.2137			

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the course, the two teachers highlighted the importance of communication and trust. While it would seem obvious that it is important to plan and evaluate before and after classes and courses, it does not always happen. To make the class successful, the instructors tried to ensure that they always communicated face to face, or via shared documents and e-mail. They also emphasized the importance of allowing each other the freedom to experiment with new techniques and approaches. There is a danger perhaps in designing course objectives for a new class and then trying to control the learning process to meet those objectives. The teachers chose

to trust that the students could take on a challenge if the necessary amount of help and guidance was provided and to provide that support flexibly and responsibly.

This paper offers a model of collaborative CLIL course design while being aware that a number of factors may influence the way a CLIL course is planned and implemented. Moreover, the data collected throughout this project is, in nature, more qualitative, although some attempts were made to analyze qualitative data as well. It should be noted that the data sample may have been too small for sounder correlational analysis, although this can be achieved in appropriate contexts.

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