

Facilitating Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) through Web-based Activities: A
Teacher's Reflection

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Introduction

I work at a university-based English language program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. Our program offers intensive English instruction for non-degree seeking students as well as English for Academic Purposes for matriculated undergraduate and graduate students. We also offer language and culture programs to partner institutions overseas. Apart from my administrative duties, I usually teach one course per semester. When I teach a course, I often adopt authentic materials instead of using commercial course books written specifically for second language learners. I have had great success in using the Glee TV series for an intermediate listening and speaking course and authentic lectures posted by Yale and other universities on YouTube for an academic communication course. When I had an opportunity to teach a reading course on language and culture, I was inspired to continue using authentic materials. With an interest in language and culture myself, in preparation for the course, I anticipated that my students would be interested in reading academic texts on the topic. I envisioned that they would be able to talk about cultures using such terms as low context, high

context, power distance, identity, communication styles, and so on. In short, I would like them to read academic texts, learn some technical concepts in intercultural communication, use those concepts to reflect on their intercultural experiences, and improve their linguistic competence while doing those things. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) provided a framework that would help me to achieve those teaching goals. In addition, I would like the students to engage in the learning process interactively and collaboratively both inside and outside the classroom. Internet-based technologies were employed to enable me to engage the learners in those manners. In addition, the concept ‘peer-to-peer collaborative dialogue’ provided me with information of conditions facilitative of language learning. Especially, a materials development framework introduced by Tomlinson (2003a) helped guide me through the process of developing materials and activities for the course.

In this paper, I will explain the concepts and frameworks mentioned above and how they informed my decision making: CLIL, peer-to-peer collaborative dialogue, and a materials development framework. After that, I will describe a unit of materials, a lesson, and several technologies used to organize various web-based activities in the course together with my evaluation of the materials and activities based on learners’ feedback and language production.

CLIL

As the term suggests, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach with a dual focus on language and content (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). According to the authors, the term was adopted in 1994 within the European context to describe and further design good practice in schools where teaching and learning take place in an additional language. You may wonder what the difference is between CLIL and other

approaches, such as content-based instruction, immersion education, and bilingual education. According to Coyle, what separates CLIL from those approaches is ‘the planned pedagogic integration of contextualized content, cognition, communication, and culture into the teaching and learning practice’ (p. 45). This integration, as illustrated by the 4Cs Framework explained in Coyle et. al (2010), is what drew me to CLIL. In this framework, the 4Cs stand for communication, content, cognition, and culture. In simple terms, content refers to the subject matter; communication refers to language learning and using and is used interchangeably with language; cognition refers to learning and thinking processes; and culture refers to the goal of developing intercultural understanding in language education. In addition, all decisions regarding those components are within specific contexts with specific learner needs, curricular goals, and resources.

As I will focus on just one unit on identity and intercultural communication in my course, I am going to explain how the 4Cs were considered. Regarding the content, the materials would cover different types of social identities (gender identity, sexual identity, age identity, racial identity, and ethnic identity) and related issues (stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination). Regarding cognition, learners would need to define concepts, give examples to further explain the concepts, and use the concepts to better understand issues presented in the readings as well as interpret their experiences.

In terms of communication, to determine the language focus for the unit, the Language Triptych in Coyle et al. (2010) provided me with a useful analytical tool. According to the authors, language *of* learning is language needed for learners to access basic concepts and skills relating to the subject theme or topic. In this case, the materials would need to facilitate the learning of concepts in intercultural communication. Language *for* learning focuses on the kind

of language needed to operate in a foreign language environment (strategies to work in pairs or in groups, to discuss ideas, to ask questions, etc.). In my unit, I planned to instruct the learners on how to work in groups. Language *through* learning has to do with capturing language as it is needed by individual learners during the learning process (ibid.) For example, learners may need assistance with language to articulate their understanding. Also, certain new language and skills emerge as learners use language in the learning process. Recognizing learners' needs and their emerging language and skills, the teacher can develop or tailor the materials to address needs and reinforce emerging abilities. Many activities in my course were developed based on the learners' emerging needs. Regarding the remaining C in the framework, i.e. culture, the materials in the current unit would aim to develop learners' self-awareness in intercultural communication and understanding and appreciation of diversity and differences.

A framework for materials development

In various books on materials development and materials evaluation by Tomlinson, (2003a; 2003b; 2011), the author urges materials developers and evaluators to follow a coherent and principled framework to guide their work. This framework requires materials developers and evaluators to review the current knowledge accumulated through empirical research in the field of language learning and teaching, reflect on their own beliefs on language learning and teaching, articulate those beliefs, and turn them into criteria to guide the materials development and evaluation process. The framework also defines materials in a broad sense to include any language input that learners are exposed to and any learning activities that they engage in. While I had taken numerous courses on language learning and teaching and have taught EFL and ESL for many years, I had never explicitly articulated beliefs and principles that were specific and measurable enough to be used as criteria for materials development. The process of articulating

my beliefs and writing the criteria for materials development was useful for me to review and reflect on various concepts and frameworks in second language learning and teaching that had likely influenced my pedagogical decisions. These concepts included input, output, interaction, cognition, noticing, feedback, learner motivation, engagement, meaning, and form. I followed the process and came up with 20 ‘universal criteria,’ which were defined by Tomlinson (2003a) to be those that should be used for any materials development projects. These criteria were influenced by Tomlinson’s (2003a) list of criteria but were also what I strongly believed in. I also came up with local criteria that reflect my specific knowledge of the particular context and learners. Below are some examples of my universal criteria.

- To what extent are the materials likely to provide learners exposure to comprehensible language input?
- To what extent are the materials likely to engage learners affectively?
- To what extent are the materials likely to engage learners cognitively?
- To what extent are the materials likely to provide learners opportunities to respond personally to the content of the input?

Collaborative dialogue and online technologies

Apart from beliefs that have been transformed into specific criteria for materials development, I’ve been fascinated by the concept ‘peer-to-peer collaborative dialogue’ (Swain et al., 2002 for a review) with collaborative dialogue being defined as ‘dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building’ (Swain, 2000, p. 102). Swain (2000), citing Wells (1999), elaborates on the concept of collaborative dialogue by explaining that an utterance can be looked at simultaneously as process and product: as ‘saying’ and as ‘what is said.’ To be specific, by ‘saying,’ the speaker is engaged in the cognitive act of making meaning.

Once he or she has spoken, the utterance becomes an object for further exploration by the speaker and others, a process through which content and linguistic knowledge are co-constructed.

Therefore, to facilitate learners' comprehension of language input, mastery of content knowledge, and increased control of the target language, I wanted my materials to encourage my students to articulate their understanding as well as interact and collaborate to co-construct their content and language knowledge. With the availability of online technologies such as discussion forum, text chat, and online glossary, learner-learner interaction and collaboration can be done inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom, face-to-face as well as online.

These technologies do not only extend learner-learner interaction and collaboration beyond the physical classroom walls, but also have the potential to mitigate the constraints of the classroom setting, such as teacher domination and linguistic anxiety among shy students. In addition, computer-mediated communication has been documented in the literature to provide learners more time to plan and monitor their output and produce more complex language (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996). Also, the more permanent nature of written language in those media potentially allows the learners to review their language as a 'product' and the teacher to analyze the learners' emerging skills and needs.

In short, I would like my students to help one another to understand the content of the reading through collaborative dialogue. I would like them to be able to communicate complicated ideas in the content area. I would like them to produce more language. I would like them to also produce more complex language. And I would like them to collaborate to learn new language items through both classroom and online work.

Online technologies

In the course I tried different technologies including synchronous text chat, discussion forum, VoiceThread, online glossary, and interactive vocabulary games on Quizlet. Synchronous (happening at the same time) text chat allows two or more people to ‘talk’ to one another by typing into a common window in real time. If you have an email account such as Gmail or Yahoo or a Facebook account, you can chat with other contacts on your list when you and your contacts are online at the same time. Our course management system, Moodle, has this feature. I can set up a chat room, and students enter the chat room to talk with one another.

Unlike synchronous text chat, communication in a discussion forum is asynchronous. In a discussion forum, a thread of exchanges is initiated when somebody starts a post and others reply to the post and to other participants’ posts at their own time.

VoiceThread, as the name suggests, allows people to engage in a thread of voice exchanges. A thread can be started when somebody posts a talk and others respond to the first post or to previous posts. Similar to the discussion forum, the exchange is asynchronous.

Moodle also allows teachers to set up an online glossary, where teachers and students can create dictionary-like entries by entering a concept, a definition or definitions, and examples for the concept. The entries can be searched or browsed alphabetically and by the author.

Quizlet is a website where teachers and students can create sets of words with definitions and/ or examples. Based on the sets, Quizlet will create flashcards, games, and tests for students to study the sets.

I tried those tools because of their potential to encourage learner interaction, collaboration, and contribution. Based on students' participation and feedback, among those tools activities on the discussion forum and the online glossary were the most successful in the course.

The next sections describe a unit of materials on identity and intercultural communication and a lesson that aimed at engaging the learners in thinking about the topic, articulating their personal responses to some personal stories, and learning content and language. Various web-based activities will then be explained and evaluated.

A unit of materials and a lesson

When I taught the course, I taught a group of 11 Japanese students. The course lasted for 7 weeks. Students met for four hours in the classroom and two hours online every week. A unit on identity and intercultural communication presented here was taught in over two weeks. The unit objectives included objectives relating to the 4Cs framework. The materials were developed to meet the 20 universal criteria and five local criteria previously mentioned. Overall, the materials consisted of the following major activities: discussion of the concept identity; a reading on social and cultural identities; a reading on racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. followed by student group presentations; discussion of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination; and further readings with summaries and personal responses.

In the first lesson in the unit, learners were encouraged to think about the concept 'identity,' relate to others' personal stories of identity transformation and conflicts, and express their personal responses to the stories. Below were the instructions given to the learners in the lesson.

1. In this unit, we are going to focus on identity and intercultural communication. We are going to discuss the concept; categories of social and cultural identities; and stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination as related to social and cultural identities. We are going to do various readings and you will work individually and collaboratively to complete tasks related to the readings.
2. What is identity? Simply put, identity is the concept of who we are. Think about words that can describe you. Think about what groups you belong to. Complete the following sentence with as many words as possible.

I am (a) _____, a _____, a _____

As you can see we are many different things at the same time. We are different things at different times to different people.

3. Read the following stories. While you read, imagine yourself in those situations. What do you learn about the concept identity from the excerpts? I'd like us to read 2 stories aloud and 3 stories in silence.
4. Now talk in pairs. What do you feel about the authors of the stories? What would you like to say to them?
5. Now look at the stories again and think about the concept identity. How can you describe it?
6. Ok, so time is up for today's class. I'm going to give you a 5-page reading about different social and cultural identities. However, each of you won't have to read all five pages because you are going to collaborate and help one another understand the reading. We are going to have 2 groups. Group 1 is going to read about gender, sexual, and age identities.

Group 2 is going to read about racial and ethnic identities. When we meet in class the next time, you're going to work with people from the other group to share your understanding of the reading. I have questions to guide your reading here, and I'd like members from each group to also collaborate at home to answer the questions.

Web-based activities

In the following lessons, I asked students to discuss in groups in the chat room. I gave them questions about the reading as suggestions of what they could discuss. Although students did participate and could find the answers to the questions, there was lack of interaction. They simply divided the questions among themselves and answered them individually. At least in my course, it was not effective for the task I set up. This makes me think synchronous text chat may not be so effective in encouraging interaction and collaboration outside the classroom. Students may not be interested in chatting about 'serious' matters. I remember I really enjoyed chatting in English when I came to the U.S as a student. But maybe it was because I was chatting with people who interested me instead of chatting with classmates to answer questions about required readings.

Discussion forum, on the other hand, was effective in facilitating interaction and language production in my course. In this course, I used a discussion forum for students to post their answers to reading questions and personal thoughts on the reading. The posts showed that the students could locate relevant information from the reading. They interpreted the reading. They expressed personal opinions. They shared their experiences. They wrote good summaries. They commented on one another's posts. I also had opportunities to give comments and feedback. Their face-to-face discussion following the online discussion was fruitful and lively.

The asynchronous nature and the relative interactivity of the technology were a good combination for my group of students.

Reading the students' posts on the discussion forum, I also found opportunities to capture their emerging language and skills (in other words, language *through* learning). Students needed new vocabulary to express their ideas. They needed some instruction in how to paraphrase ideas. They needed to learn how to elaborate on their understanding of the content by giving further explanations and examples. Recognizing students' needs, I could then tailor follow-up activities to further develop those skills and language.

Online glossary was another successful task in the course. At the end of each week, I asked students to create entries in an online dictionary to document new words and concepts that they learned. This is one of the features of Moodle, our course management system. Each student had to submit three entries, and they could not have the same words or concepts that others had submitted. I commented on their entries and developed activities that helped them to learn the new words and concepts. They seemed to like this project. Their self-assessment and the final exam showed they started to acquire the new words through repeated encounters in the readings and intentional vocabulary learning through the lists they generated and exercises the students and I created.

In conclusion, regarding the use of technologies, learner-learner interaction on the computer is mediated by the medium. A task designed with a particular technology needs to consider not only general principles of language teaching and learning, but also the affordances, i.e. the opportunities that the technology offers and its effect on communication, as well as its constraints; learner experience and perceptions of the technology; and other factors that

contribute to their task performance. The integration of technology in my course was successful only to a certain extent as success was gauged by the amount of communication, the content knowledge the learned displayed, and the quality of language they produced.

Final thoughts

As teachers, we regularly encounter new concepts and frameworks through reading, interacting with colleagues, and attending professional development activities. In a course on language and culture, the CLIL approach helped me to determine the objectives of my materials. The concept ‘collaborative dialogue’ helped me to think of ways to facilitate learner-learner interaction and knowledge co-construction. A principled materials development framework helped me to crystalize my knowledge and beliefs into specific criteria that guided my selection and development of materials. Technologies provided me with specific tools for organizing activities that encouraged interaction beyond the classroom walls. Reflection on and articulation of my beliefs and principles pushed me to constantly think of how to engage learners in ways that best facilitate their content knowledge development as well as their language acquisition and development. The process also helped me to grow as a reflective teacher.

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