

# Fostering Creativity and Well-being through CLIL Learning and Teaching

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## Abstract

CLIL teaching and learning has gradually become accepted in many schools in Japan. It is gaining recognition by more people these days and has become part of the curriculum in some schools as well. It is an excellent method of learning subjects through another language, particularly for a country like Japan that has had problems with low English proficiency and has been trying to find ways to improve the situation for many decades. As Dale and Tanner (2012) mentioned, CLIL not only develops students' communication skills but also deepens their cognitive learning, and broadens their understanding. In addition, students seem to be more motivated towards learning as they have to work harder to complete assignments and try to use and think in English more often than when it is taught just as a foreign language. On the other hand, there are many challenges to face and go through, as many teachers and students feel stressed by this sudden CLIL/EMI trend without proper support or preparation. Most teachers are required to teach their subjects in English without proper training and it is also a big challenge for students to study in English, as the subjects are sometimes hard for them to learn even in their native language. Furthermore, unlike subject teachers, it is not easy for language teachers to find suitable content to teach in a CLIL class. Therefore, I would like to propose a "MyLife" Storybook project in this paper and for language teachers to take into consideration when they plan their lessons. If they use it as part of the course content, it will help students gain confidence before or while learning other subjects in English.

## Keywords

CLIL, Creativity, well-being, 4Cs, Japanese young people, MyLife Storybook

## Introduction

There are two main reasons that I would like to promote the MyLife Storybook project as part of the university course curriculum. What makes CLIL distinct from other teaching

methodologies is that both language and content are equally important (Coyle, 2007). There are many advantages to be gained by introducing CLIL teaching and learning into Japanese universities. First of all, it will help students to use English in a more natural and realistic way. Second, it helps Japanese universities to match global standards and conduct courses in English for both Japanese and international students, which has gradually become a growing demand at all levels for Japanese students. Third, it helps students to activate their brains in a more positive way by thinking in and using another language to learn their subjects. So, CLIL brings us a refreshing point of view for teaching and learning, but at the same time, both teachers and students will need support to participate in a healthier way with less stress. We are living in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and 2020 is the very first year of the new decade; however, it has been a very hard year for many people because of COVID-19. Compared to 20 years ago, when I was still a student, the world has been changing more rapidly and we have got so much information to digest and choose from. Some people may say that is what life is all about but particularly now, with the influence of Coronavirus, not just every month, but every week, or even every day seems to be more and more uncertain and unpredictable. People get more confused and depressed when they lose their health, their jobs, their confidence in themselves and their hopes for the future. According to Jones (September 2020, BBC), many university students are confused and have become more anxious because most of their classes have switched to online, and it has also greatly affected their job hunting activities and their future plans. This is no doubt a difficult time for everyone and thus both teachers and students need to take care of their well-being more than ever.

For the reasons mentioned above, I would like to introduce MyLife Storybook, also a well-being project that will help language teachers to plan for their CLIL lessons, particularly when it is not easy for those teachers to find a “subject” to teach, unlike math, history, chemistry, and other subject teachers. Incorporating well-being as a subject content in class will be most inspiring for both teacher and students. It also helps students to know themselves better and be more confident and hopeful for their future. In this paper, firstly, I would like to start with the reasons why we need to promote well-being for students. Secondly, I would like to introduce the MyLife Storybook project which I have been using with some of my classes for the past five years, and provide a brief explanation about how to do it. Finally, I will briefly analyse the outcome of this project and share some results and feedback that I have observed and received from the students.

## **The needs for rebuilding students' well-being**

Teaching and learning through CLIL is quite demanding for both teachers and students. As a language teacher teaching through CLIL, it has been my major concern that a lack of teaching materials and support can result in teachers shouldering a huge responsibility for preparing, planning, teaching and assessing. It may even give rise to some mental challenges in some ways, and the same for the students. Subject teachers already have the “content” to teach while language teachers need to search for appropriate content in order to develop both content and language sides equally. The content in the usual commercial textbooks is not always authentic or realistic for students to learn, as some of it requires imagination and assumptions. Another thought that I always have in mind is how to make CLIL learning and teaching more enjoyable and easier to start with, and that is how I came up with the MyLife Storybook project idea five years ago.

According to some surveys about young people's well-being (KYODO 2014 and Tanaka 2018), many young Japanese people have aspirations to be useful to society and want to contribute to their country; on the other hand, results also show that most of them have less self-confidence, and lower mental well-being and self-esteem when compared to young people from other countries such as the United States, South Korea and China. In addition, according to another study by UNICEF (Nakai, 2020) it was discovered that Japanese children have lower mental well-being compared to those in other developed countries. Children and young people are not happy about their daily lives and thus it is difficult for them to find motivation or be positive about themselves. This is where the 4Cs (Cognition, Culture, Content and Communication) framework of CLIL comes in. By using this 4Cs framework creatively and flexibly, I believe there is a great opportunity to not only raise the confidence and well-being level of young people, but also help them to make a positive improvement in their language abilities and render their learning process more meaningful and joyful. This gives students a strong motivation to learn about themselves in English and it will certainly help them to establish their identity and feel more positive about themselves.

Students own their stories and therefore they are more motivated. They know what they want to say and are curious about how to tell it, how to share with others. Moreover, it will certainly provide good subject content for language teachers to focus on and the MyLife Storybook project that I would like to promote could be a great starting point for many students' self-discovery journeys even after they graduate from the university. Besides, one

main reason that many Japanese university students cannot speak English fluently even after 6 years of learning it at school is because they didn't really have the opportunity to use it in real life. Learning through CLIL will give them a realistic reason to use English. At the same time, it is most important that we find something that relates to the students themselves.

### **Using MyLife Storybook as a starting point for CLIL learning**

When I started this MyLife Storybook project a couple of years ago, it was nothing more than just a thought, an idea to help students create their own learning content. One semester later, it had grown into an experience of inspiration and positive learning for both the students and myself, and I became more sure of the needs to do this project with university students, particularly those in their first two years. There are four main benefits of doing this project.

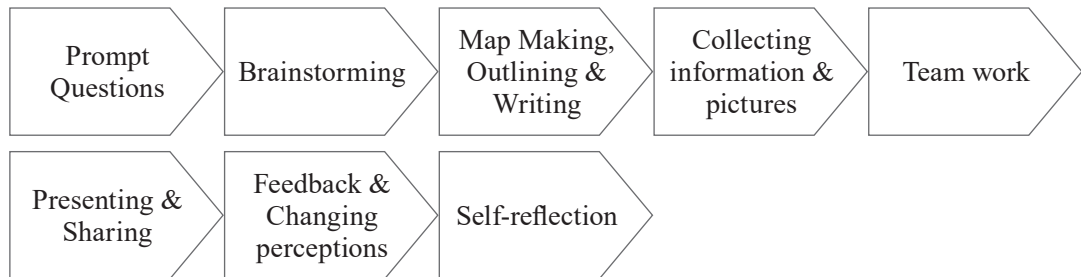
First of all, the MyLife Storybook project is based on the 4Cs framework of CLIL (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010), which are: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Community (Culture). The MyLife Storybook project incorporates the 4Cs into a process in which students can integrate their language learning and content learning in a meaningful and practical way. Regarding the element of Communication, as Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010:54) mentioned, 'learn as you use, use as you learn' is very important for current education, and they also emphasized that the keys to successful learning are authenticity and relevance. Regarding the element of Content, MyLife Storybook is all about ourselves, our experiences, our thoughts and our favorites. It is a project to provide achievable, sustainable and realistic tasks to motivate students' English learning and improve their well-being. It is a book that helps students to connect the dots by reviewing their past, present and future in a personalized time line. It also provides them the opportunity to view their future positively and optimistically through pictures, charts, a time-line and their own comments. It is a book that not only provides personalized learning for each student, actively engaging them in their learning process but also helps them notice the language they need to use and know. We can regard this active learning as CLIL's Cognition in the framework. Regarding the element of Community (Culture), MyLife Storybook offers the opportunity for students to share their experiences in small groups, in a classroom, and leads them to be aware of their identity, the importance of their presence, their uniqueness and citizenship as part of our global society. By understanding themselves better, they are able to have a clearer vision of who they are, where they are, what they want and what they can contribute.

Secondly, when we tell our own stories, it helps us to establish our identity, giving us more confidence about who we are and showing us what direction we are heading in. I believe that everyone has a story to tell and to share. There is much to gain from this project even though the creating process, such as collecting materials, pictures and information, might be rather time consuming for students to get used to. However, it is worth the effort. Additionally, from my personal experience and my teaching experience, I found that when we personalize our learning and make the learning relevant to our lives, it enhances the clarity of our thought processes and memory.

Thirdly, as all university students have been learning English for many years, it is time they learned how to use English practically and be able to express themselves properly. MyLife Storybook will help them talk about themselves and share their thoughts in a more natural setting. It gives students an opportunity to interact with each other and express themselves. Listening to others' stories will also help students to achieve more and feel motivated to learn self-expression. Besides, most of us learn by what we see and the MyLife Storybook project will definitely help a lot of visual learners to improve their English fluency much faster. It would be a good compass, a guide for university students. Having studied English for a long period as a subject for entrance exams, they have had sufficient input and it is time for them to use the language in a real situation that is deeply related to themselves.

Finally, the process of making a MyLife Storybook itself involves a lot of fun and discovery. It will help students continually to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their learning and well-being by knowing themselves better. Visualizing our thoughts and knowledge is a great learning process. Being able to think creatively and flexibly is a great life skill which will help students to respond to unexpected, uncertain situations, and give them a sense of control in this constantly changing world we are living in, particularly now more than ever, in this difficult time this year.

Here is a brief flow chart to show some main steps and the process of the MyLife Storybook project.



In addition, Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2008: 29-30) listed the following as the core features of CLIL methodology: multiple focus, safe and enriching learning environment, authenticity, active learning, scaffolding and co-operation. The three most important of those elements for the MyLife Storybook project are ‘safe and enriching learning environment’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘active learning’. Therefore, I conclude with some considerations to ensure all students flourish in their learning while going through the project.

### **The outcome of this project**

The survey was mainly conducted in the classes taught during the past three years, between 2017 and 2019. Those classes were originally communication courses. There were 288 participants and the data were collected mainly via questionnaires at the end of each course.

98 % had positive learning experience through this project. Only 2 % were less positive about the project and the following were the three main reasons that they were less satisfied:

- 1 Not enough English skill to present.
- 2 Not enough vocabulary
- 3 Not confident to speak about themselves

98% of the group were positive about this project and here are nine main reasons as examples:

- 1 Having the opportunity to actually use English meaningfully
- 2 Learning a lot of things about themselves that they hadn't noticed before. They got to know themselves better and more deeply.
- 3 Feeling more confident to speak in front of others
- 4 They were happy to share their stories with others, and inspired to see other classmates' MyLife Storybooks.
- 5 The step-by-step guide helped the learning process and deepened their thinking.
- 6 English vocabulary increased.
- 7 They learned how to use pictures, drawings and keywords effectively.
- 8 It was fun and brain-friendly. They were motivated to learn more about themselves.
- 9 It was a life recording experience, and they wanted to continue doing it after the course.

To sum up, most students felt happy and positive during the creating process and they developed a special attachment towards their own MyLife Storybook. They also felt proud to introduce what they had found about themselves and enjoyed presenting it to others, even with shy students who do not usually talk much. For the past few years, I've spent some time using the usual communication courses to conduct CLIL classes by instructing students how to create their MyLife Storybooks. The content is quite different from their usual academic subjects but I believe the MyLife Storybook project could be a starting point for students to go through CLIL learning. It is an important time for them to think and talk about themselves, particularly after they have learned all the basics of English and they are free from the pressure of the entrance exams. During these classes, I found that students process the information very differently based on how they define and identify themselves. It was a creative and innovative experience with rewarding results for both the students and me. At the end of each course, students discovered more about themselves and were amazed by some small victories or achievements in the past that they had almost forgotten. By regaining their confidence, they feel more positive and happier to use English and actually became more motivated toward further learning in English. In addition, seeing different points of view help expand their creative capacity. It was encouraging for them to see other students' MyLife Storybooks, and listen to other students' stories. They learned from each other greatly and helped each other in many different ways.

Learning by CLIL could be a big challenge for students in some ways; however, it is a revolutionary methodology for Japanese students to finally improve their English proficiency. Even though the methodology itself is not new, it is innovative to incorporate into the Japanese university' curriculum. There are certainly some more issues to consider and we should not forget that teachers' well-being is equally important as well.

## **Conclusion**

As Llinares, Morton, and Whittaker (2012) also mentioned, teachers can create the environment and provide the opportunity for interaction to encourage students to communicate meaningfully and in a genuine way. Planning and creating a MyLife Storybook will help language teachers to make their own teaching more creative, and teachers are encouraged to create their own MyLife Storybooks first as a sample to show and share with the class. It will boost teachers' well-being too.

From the well-being point of view, the MyLife Storybook creates an alternative "happy place" in students' minds, filled with hope, possibility and joy. Being understood, being able to share your story is a pleasure and self-healing process too. It is also a book that students can keep to comfort themselves when they feel sad, or encourage themselves when they feel frustrated or depressed. It will help to improve students' self-esteem greatly. They will be stronger mentally when they find the meaning and the joys of their life and existence. It helps students to learn how to present something they care about. At the same time, the MyLife Storybook project will encourage students to think creatively and use English in a natural situation and that will also help them prepare for uncertain situations during times of crisis and beyond. The more realistic and fun the task is, the better and more motivating for the students to improve their English communication skills and believe in their own abilities to make things happen in the future.



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