



Title	A Book as a Textbook : Unintentional Soft-CLIL? What and How It Works
Author(s)	Záborská, Dorota
Citation	言語文化共同研究プロジェクト. 2021, 2020, p. 43-52
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/85024
rights	
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A Book as a Textbook — Unintentional Soft-CLIL? —

What and How It Works

Dorota Záborská

1. Introduction

The academic year of 2020-2021 was full of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that both teachers and learners had to face. The challenges ranged from personal to institutional, from pedagogical to psychological. Digital literacy (or the lack thereof) was a constant theme. The stress of getting accustomed to various online environments was accompanied by concerns for the wellbeing of the students as well as the teachers. Naturally, these factors strongly influenced the choices that teachers made when considering their teaching practice, and the ways to adjust it to their own particular teaching context. In this article, I describe in detail the teaching practice implemented in two general English language courses at a public university in Japan over this precarious academic year, with the aim to share and reflect on the efficacy of implementing a soft-CLIL teaching approach.

As a researcher of the psychology of language learning and motivation, with a particular interest in positive psychology, I have always paid attention to possibilities of what could be applied from the research to my classroom. I felt even more strongly so during the pandemic. After I describe the teaching context, i.e., school, learners, online platforms and tools, I explain how my own research pursuits connected and influenced the choice of the textbook. I proceed with short introductions of several activities in which students engaged. I reflect on how efficient various techniques utilized in synchronous online classes proved to be, and then I conclude this article with some thoughts on the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, who at the same time is able to enhance the overall wellbeing of everyone in the classroom.

Although this particular pedagogical practice occurred solely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many activities can be easily transferred to the physical classroom settings.

2. The Teaching Context

2.1 School, Courses, and Students

Two general English language skills courses described in this article were part of the compulsory subjects for general education and took place at a medium-sized public university in the Kansai area. One was a compulsory General English course offered to first-year students from the Department of Japanese Food Culture in the Faculty of Letters. The other was also a compulsory General English course offered to second-year students from the Department of Public Policy and the Department of Welfare Society in the Faculty of Public Policy. Both groups showed excellent attendance over the whole academic year. Out of 37 freshmen students who initially enrolled in the reading class, only two

dropped out. Similarly, only two sophomore students did not finish the reading class. The classes met 30 times in total, once a week, over the whole academic year.

2.2 Online Platforms and Tools

Microsoft Teams and Zoom were the two main online platforms utilized in each class. One Team was created for each course. Within each Team, I made a different channel for each of the 15 weeks. This helped to keep all activities organized, and easy for the students to find the information during and after class. It was also practical for the teacher to check the students' work and active in-class participation during class and also retrospectively. All instructions and announcements, including the homework assignments for individual class meetings were posted on Teams. Similarly, classroom materials, such as handouts or useful links for further study were distributed via Teams. Depending on their nature, assignments were collected either via the Assignments function on Teams, visible only to the teacher, or the students were asked to upload assignments on the chat, so all participants could see them and give peer feedback to one another.

Zoom was used for more direct communication. The students were free to choose whether they wanted to turn their web camera on or off. However, at the beginning and the end of each meeting, all students who had a strong enough internet connection were encouraged to turn their camera and microphone on and exchange greetings. It seemed that as a result, the majority of students, if not all, kept their cameras on throughout the lesson. Part of the Zoom meeting, usually at the beginning and the end, was held as a whole group in "the common area." A significant portion of the lesson was, however, spent in breakout rooms. This allowed students to see and directly talk with each other. The teacher would enter every breakout room at least once in the 90-minute session.

3. Teacher/Researcher and the Textbook Choice

3.1 Teacher/Research's Background and Philosophy

My positionality as a qualitative researcher affects the ways I carry out and interpret my research. It has also influenced my teaching philosophy and the choice of the textbook I used in these particular classes for these particular students. Therefore, I shall start with a brief description of my professional background. There are two main lines of work that I undertake. One is as a foreign language teacher, and the other is as a researcher of the psychology of language learners. At the tertiary level, such dual roles are often the norm, especially for those in charge of language courses. On one hand, I teach mainly language skills classes to undergraduate students. On the other hand, in my research I focus on learners of foreign languages in the later stages of life after retirement, also known as thirdagers. I explore their motivations to pursue language learning, and how their learning positively impacts their wellbeing. I naturally come across issues related to perceptions of older people in society, and the negative impact of ageism, of which younger people are simply unaware. Understanding ageing in

general is not a common topic that students have a chance to study closely. However, from a broader perspective, and for the sake of the wellbeing of society as a whole, I firmly believe that this should be part of education for younger generations. When designing a course, I ask the following complex question: How can I lead my students to experience English as a tool which enables them to learn something new; which challenges them to think more deeply about important issues; which helps them relate to those issues within their own lives and social contexts, and all the while results in improving their English language skills? However, I also have to keep in mind the practical needs of the students. Considering my students' areas of studies in this particular university, I saw it as a great opportunity to bring the issues that I am encountering in my research to their attention. Therefore, as the textbook for this course, I chose a short, non-fiction book called *Age (Reflections)*, written by biogerontologist Suresh Rattan, whom I know personally. In the following section, I shall briefly explain about the author and the contents of the book.

3.2 Book as a Textbook

Age is a short 60-page book, in which biogerontologist Suresh Rattan deals with the difficult topic of age and ageing in a very accessible and reader-friendly way. It is part of a series called Reflections, published by the Aarhus University Press. This series offers the essence of knowledge on topics such as trust, love, positive psychology and others, all written by leading researchers in those particular fields. The author was assigned to me as a mentor in a multidisciplinary Master Class, "Portraying Old Age and Ageing to Counteract Ageism" held in 2019 in Gothenburg, Sweden. I read the book before meeting him for the Master Class. His approachable writing style, and later, in the actual course, his mentoring and friendly personality were decisive factors in choosing the text. The book is divided into six short chapters:

1. Just a number
2. The emergence of life,
3. The progression of life,
4. Lifelong zest,
5. The formula for eternal life, and
6. Me and my multiple ages.

As is obvious from the chapter titles, topics of a philosophical, biological, sociological, and psychological nature are covered throughout the book. Although the central theme of the book is age and ageing, it also offers a variety of emergent related sub-topics. Ageing is viewed through different lenses, which along with engaging examples elucidating the central theme, kept the student readers interested and provided ample food for thought. During the group discussions following assigned readings, students could easily discover emerging subtopics, which they further researched themselves

in preparation for final presentations. In the following part, I describe some of the activities carried out, in which I refer to myself as the teacher.

4. Activities and techniques

Being suddenly and abruptly forced into an unfamiliar online teaching/learning environment presented a major challenge. My goal was to establish a positive and trusting atmosphere that would motivate students to willingly participate and take a proactive role in their own learning. From my perspective, this was even more important than in the regular classroom setting. It was also crucial to realize that the pace and time allotted to activities would differ from those in the physical classroom. The first three meetings, for example, were spent on “let’s-get-to-know-each-other” activities. The students first wrote self-introductions and presented them to the whole class. Then, they shared their scripts as Word files on Teams, so everyone could read about each other again. Based on their reading, they prepared questions for their classmates to engage first in the chat, then in the breakout rooms.

“Smile and Hi!” and “Smile and Bye!” were two phrases that became our signature greetings, which triggered positive feelings and students grew to love by the end of the course. Friendly small talk with the teacher in breakout rooms also proved to be motivating for students in a way that when later “left alone unsupervised” they engaged actively in tasks following the teacher’s instructions.

Classes in the first semester were dedicated to understanding the English text. Students worked together in groups on translating portions of text, which they posted on Teams, thus having opportunities to compare their translations with others. For their homework assignment, they were asked to express their opinion about what they had read in several English sentences. These could be comments, impressions, or reflections. In weeks 9 and 10, we took a break from translating, and students had an opportunity to do some online research about one of the emergent subtopics: creation mythologies around the world. Then, they presented their findings in groups by PowerPoint on Zoom. This experience prepared them for the second semester, in which the focus shifted from their simply understanding/translating the text to presenting their understanding of the topics in the text, all in English. After each presentation, all students also wrote an informed opinion of the presented topic in English. After each group’s presentation, the presenters were asked to reflect on their own performance, and the audience wrote comments under the uploaded PowerPoint files in Teams.

There are two more activities that demonstrate a positive impact on students’ learning experiences. One is a reflective summative portfolio, which students were asked to submit at the end of the second semester, and the other is a hypothetical letter and interview questions to the author of the book, which they worked on in groups. In their summative reflective portfolio, students were asked to gather all their interactions from chats and exchanges with classmates in every class and reflect on that particular class. This enabled them to reflect on their own progress and notice a positive learning curve, as well as to observe their increased competence, and hence confidence to express themselves in English.

Writing a hypothetical letter to the author of the book was designed as follows. The students were first asked to watch an actual lecture on YouTube. It was an invited guest lecture on the biology of ageing for a virtual conference of the British Geriatric Society delivered by the author of the book. Students were asked to watch the recording on their own, at their own pace, while taking notes in their notebook. Then, they were asked to upload and share a picture of their notes on Teams and write two questions to the lecturer, imagining that they were in the audience. In the following class, all their questions were collated and shared on Teams. The students worked in groups, first sorting out the questions, then grouping similar questions, selecting the twenty most interesting ones, and finally, reorganizing them into a logical order suitable for an imagined interview. They inserted their interview questions into a letter to the author. Part of the letter was fixed and the same for every group, but there was a part in which the students wrote up examples of what they had learned or found interesting over the course of reading the book and watching the lecture on YouTube. Many students reported in their reflections that it was interesting for them to see the similarities and differences of their peers' thinking about similar topics raised in the book and the lecture.

5. Teacher as Facilitator

There are several roles that a language teacher can choose to take in an English language classroom for non-English majors at the tertiary level. At one end of the spectrum is a teacher-centered approach, which focuses on a further mastery of the technical knowledge of English and pursuit of accuracy. Depending on the course or the academic level of the students, this approach still remains in demand. However, another approach, when the context allows, is more student-centered, and enables the teacher to become a facilitator or a coach, directing the students in their learning, and allowing them time and freedom to discover on their own through collaboration with the teacher and with peers. In such a positive learning atmosphere, students want and choose to find meaning in the material used in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to look back at and evaluate a tailored CLIL, or soft-CLIL approach, in which English became a tool for conveying and communicating content. It is beyond the scope of this short article to analyze all of the rich qualitative data yielded from 110 pages (55,158 words) of students' portfolios containing reflections and comments. However, from the students' letter to the author shared in the appendix, the fact that the content was learned and that the students were able to sharpen their critical thinking is clearly observable and implicitly understandable.

Online platforms also proved to be efficient in supporting students' learning. What might have gotten lost in a physical classroom during oral-only communication, was kept available long after classes ended for both students and the teacher in Teams chats and files. This kind of digitalized record

of the classroom activities is certainly usable from now on, even when we return to face-to-face learning and teaching.

7. Bonus for Readers

After the letter-writing activity, I put together all the different parts of students' hypothetical letters in which they described what they had learned, selected about 20 questions for the author, and actually emailed this letter to him (Appendix A). To keep the letter authentic, none of the grammatical mistakes were edited. The mistakes did not hinder what students wanted to communicate. Very generously, the author recorded an almost 15-minute-long response to this letter and answered some of the students' questions. We watched his response together during our final class. The students were thrilled to listen to Dr Rattan's response, which they expressed in their thank-you notes later sent to the author in private email communication. (Appendix B).

8. Appendices

Appendix A. The Letter for Suresh Sensei

Dear Professor Rattan,

We are students of Faculty of Letters and Faculty of Public Policy at Kyoto Prefectural University. Over the course of this academic year, we've read your book AGE and watched your talk on YouTube.

Through this lecture, we were interested in the relationship between physical aging and mental age. We were very surprised that the essential lifespan is 45 years old. We want to keep to have some goals and social roles even over the essential lifespan. Even if people get older, they can live fun like they were young people, so we want to keep enjoying forever. We learned that you don't have to worry too much about your age and how long you want to live is important because age is just a number. Also, it was interesting that even stress leads to our health depending on the type. So, in order to stay healthy, it was important for us how to live to satisfy our lives.

I learned age is very deep and has many meanings. I don't think it is necessary to have eternal life. Life is not eternal, and now is vividly fun because there is an end. I used to think of age as just a number, so it was interesting to learn about your multifaceted view of age. The way of thinking about life has changed. I felt like I was stressed out because I had less time to exercise every day, but in fact, I wanted to work out knowing that exercising also reduces stress.

We learned that the number of age is not represent lifespan and we are not always negative about aging. We worry about aging effects. Problems with aging may be inevitable. However, we should face aging for life from now on. First, we think the notion the right age to die is impressive. After reading that chapter, one of our members' grandfather died at the age of 90. The member thinks he died at the right age to die as relatives weren't so depressed. We die as individuals, but continue to

go as species. We agree this way of thinking of you. Also, we were very interested in whether it was worth living as an individual.

Moreover, homeodynamics is most memorable word. When we read that its space reaches largest size at 25, we thought it was too young. This age is too low for starting to lose resistance to many factors. It is also interesting for us that our age flows forward and backward depending on how we feel, how we behave and how we visualize ourselves. This part taught us that age is not absolute and our identity can change in various ways. We learned that age can have a positive or negative impact on our physical and mental health depending on how we are aware of it. I found this interesting. So I have a few questions for you. I am looking forward to your answers. Thank you very much for your time.

Your talk was very interesting and filled with a lot of knowledge we knew newly. It was opportunity for us to think not only about aging, but also about our life. We learned we tend to have a negative image about aging, but it's not all bad. We've vaguely wanted to live longer, but now we want to make each day a fulfilling way of spending. And, simply, I had an image that modern people would live until their 80s, so I was surprised our "essential lifespan" is 45 years.

Your talk was very interesting, and we could learn and think various things regarding AGE.

What impressed us are as follows: •Our favorite phrase is "We are born as copies, but we die as originals." We knew it for the first time by your book. It's cool. We try to live as originals. •We knew about essential lifespan for the first time after reading this book. We think this is a very important period for humans. •We are interested in the large difference about retired age between athletes and artists. Especially, what impressed us was artists leave people their works and athletes leave people their record and memory about their performance. •We learned that we are likely to have a negative impact on aging, but it's not necessarily bad. We don't know why, but we want to live more, but what is important for us is to enjoy the limited life and spend the fulfilling days, we noticed. We could change the perspective of "age". We almost all will work until we become 60 years old. Therefore, we thought that our essential life is 60 or so.

After your lecture we learned that we need 45 years for reproduction and continuation of generations. We didn't have such perspective about "essential life span", so it was interesting for us. We learned that for leaving offspring, essential life span is very important. We thought how we age after that depends on our way of thinking about our age. But we clearly learned that "essential life span" would make our life more abundant. We thought we must treasure our valuable time and life again. It was good for us to know about "essential life span".

Also, "Homeodynamic space" was an intriguing idea for us. Thanks to such an image, we were able to think about ageing well and understand your study. Aging cannot be stopped so we thought we should live our own lives and become original. We learned that we must live with thinking that time is important, and little stress is good for our health, so we decided to be careful the measure of stress.

We thought that getting old was negative thing, but how to get old is deferent for each person. So, we think that we want to get old without regrets. We want to get eternal life. We could understand the essence of age and changed our way of thinking. Our fear diminished.

We learned about that interventional stress is needed. In the long run, I felt that stress should be a means of stepping up to live better, and that moderate tension and stimulation are necessary to gain a sense of accomplishment from overcoming them. And to keep health, it is good to help each other. So, we learn human relationship is important.

We would like to ask you some questions. Thank you in advance for any answers that you'll kindly share with us.

Respectfully Yours,

Students of Dori's class at KPU, Kyoto

Our questions are as follows:

- 1. What does the natural environment mean to humans in modern times?*
- 2. Do you do something to keep [your] homeodynamics space or reducing the rate of homeodynamics space shrinkage?*
- 3. From the perspective of gerontologist, what should we young people of 20 do to spend the better life?*
- 4. What do you do when you feel big stress?*
- 5. How can you measure amount of one's homeodynamic space correctly?*
- 6. Is there anything you care about your health as a gerontologist?*
- 7. Why did you decide to study age and aging?*
- 8. What is your ideal way of aging?*
- 9. Does the way of thinking about life and lifetime change depending on the place of origin?*
- 10. What do you do in your daily routine to keep your health?*
- 11. Why do women and men think differently about aging?*
- 12. You say that the lifespan of living things varies from individual to individual. However, women have a longer life expectancy. Why do you think it is?*
- 13. When you were 19 years old, what did you think about your age?*
- 14. Japan is famous as a country which has many longevity people. Do you think it's because the Japanese personality such as being polite and attentive affects a low level of stress?*
- 15. Do you think the bedridden state is the living state? Should we regard this state as a part of our lifespan?*
- 16. Do you think the Essential Lifespan will get longer in the future?*
- 17. What do you think is the best way to create mental hormetins?*

18. *Have your thoughts about death changed after your research?*
19. *You seemed to enjoy getting older. How will life change if you enjoy aging?*
20. *Do you think that the size of homeodynamic space is related to parents' one?*

Appendix B. Teacher and Author Exchange

What follows is an exchange between the teacher and the author as posted in the comments to the video message for the students on YouTube.

Dorota Zaborska:

Dear Suresh ji,

My beautiful students of English A and English B classes were so excited to watch your video and listen to your message. I felt over the moon as I was observing their focused faces, and then reading their comments and words of appreciation...and realization even... about life. Their perceptions of age have changed. They became more thoughtful, more considerate, kinder...or so I believe.

You've got all their comments in my email, and my intention was to share here on YouTube 'with the world' a short digest, but that turned out to be an impossible task. All of their 55 comments carried some extremely valuable thoughts. I loved them all. Here is but one:

"After reading "AGE", my image of aging has changed for the better and I learned that we can do anything depending on how we think. I want to interact with a lot of people and use the knowledge and experiences I gain from them as food for my life. We will all die someday, but I think it is because our lives are finite that we have the desire to make the most of every day. I want to enjoy every day of my life in the future.

Throughout the year, I had the opportunity to think deeply not only about my age but also about life. I would also like to apply what I have learned in this class to the way I live my life from now on. (Noa, 18)

From Kyoto with love,

Dori

Suresh Rattan:

Dori ji: many thanks for your feedback, which makes me very happy. I have read all the comments by your students that you have sent to me by a separate email, and I am really touched. One comment that every student wrote was that they did not expect to get any response from me, and therefore were very surprised and happy that I made that video message for them. This just shows that how important and necessary it is for us - the teachers - to be accessible to students and listen to them, and then encourage and inspire them if possible. I am glad that I have been successful in doing so to some extent.

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