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Transitioning into Academic Writing via a Soft CLIL Module on Immigration Issues

Gwyn Helverson

1. Introduction

The first writing samples students submit in general education English classes at this top university are often quite excellent personal essays. Students are familiar with the concepts of structure and support, and write in nearly perfect grammar. However, the writing often employs simplistic vocabulary and is overly emotional and clichéd, such as can be seen in this example: “I believe that we all can overcome our prejudices to make a better world.” Thus, the transition from high school-style, emotional essay writing to more formal, precise, and objective academic report writing at the university level is emphasized.

Students who are as intellectually capable as these require input beyond simple conversation class or language development activities. Fortunately, the topic of register presented itself in the form of an outburst of media, both mainstream and academic, on the infamous rhetorical style of the 45th president of the US. After Donald Trump began appearing regularly in the news, one of my students said happily, “I can understand his English!” Perhaps many students of English around the world were thrilled by what they initially believed was their dramatic improvement. However, the former president’s deliberate use of simplistic, grammatically incorrect, emotive language as a rhetorical device for promoting populist policies became a topic of academic inquiry as well. Thus, another purpose of this module was to engage students with a soft CLIL approach to rhetoric in this course entitled *Identity, Migration, and Globalization*.

2. The Participants:

The participants were 219 first- and second-year university students from various majors in semi-mandatory EFL classes at a high-ranking university in Japan. Students are required to take a certain number of English classes to graduate, but they have some leeway as to which type of class they choose. The official purpose of Integrated English: Performance Workshop is language production, specifically speaking and writing. Therefore, it can be assumed that students expect to participate actively. As the students’ levels are already quite high (intermediate to high-intermediate levels are required to pass the entrance exam for this university), the focus tends towards the academic. Nonetheless, participation rates vary as these are large, unlevelled, mixed-major classes: Some students attend only to get credits, whereas others are both highly motivated and experienced.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Academic Register in Writing:

The activities for this module were created via research on the topics of academic register and academic word lists. During the first phase, hint lists in which common English words are contrasted with their more “advanced” or “academic” synonyms were distributed to the students so that they could practice and see immediate results during group work. Students were lectured on the differences between Opinion-as-End and Solution-as-End writing to improve their academic style. These exercises were created by the instructor and inspired by educational resources (Duco *et al*, 2017; Hyland, 2022; University of York, n.d.).

As Prinz & Ambornsdottir (2021, 3) explain in *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing*, the goal of any university level writing course is “to help students become independent, autonomous writers with the confidence to express their ideas and beliefs clearly through the written word.” In addition, becoming a successful communicator in English means achieving functionality in the “common currency” of ELF in the world market (Jenkins *et al*, 2011, 47).

3.2 “Soft” CLIL in the Japanese university context

“Soft” CLIL in Japan in which content is integrated with language skill-based instruction (Nishida in Talbot *et al*, 2021, 250-265) applies well to these highly capable students. Nishida’s research, as reviewed by Pavloska (2022, p. 80-81) “confirms that teaching content is intrinsically motivating for students, not only because it offers intellectual stimulation and a sense of accomplishment, but also because it is best taught in a student-centered manner where it also serves to improve students’ ‘perceived communicative competence.’”

Nishida (2021, 250) explains that Japan’s Ministry of Education’s Education Reform Plan of 2020 focuses on developing students’ English levels to meet the needs of a globalized world and has thus led to an increase in soft CLIL classes such as these. Nonetheless, McGrath (2021, 25) notes that the “cognitive burden of writing in English” is quite challenging. Some students in this course have mentioned that this is the first time they have been required to think deeply about certain topics and explain themselves in English (see Questionnaire data below).

As described in one textbook on writing a graduation thesis in English (Smiley, 2019, 22), it can be said that there are three levels of thinkers: Naive, multiplistic, and sophisticated. Naive thinkers simply accept data from authorities and parrot it back. Multiplistic thinkers realize that there are variety of viewpoints about a subject, but will ultimately try to impose their opinions on others for their own benefit. Sophisticated thinkers, however, study the process of thinking and ultimately realize that “best” practices are continually evolving alongside expanding knowledge (Smiley, 2019, 22). Students have in fact agreed: Some initially express frustration that there are no “correct” answers in writing assignments for this type of CLIL module (unlike on typical entrance exams, for example),

but then comment that they appreciate the process of inquiry itself.

As Roiha & Mäntylä note (2021, 55), “The interplay between multiple factors such as learners’ ages, aptitudes, attitudes, self-perceptions, personality, motivation or learning strategies has an effect on how successful one is learning a second or foreign language.” The sudden switch to online classes during this stressful pandemic situation has certainly exacerbated such issues, as was evident in the slightly quieter and colder atmosphere of online classes. Nonetheless, it is hoped that students will develop self-esteem and confidence via practice, realizing that they are able to construct sentences which are equivalent to—or even better than—the English level of some U.S. presidents.

3.2 Media Studies, Rhetoric and Populism

This module focuses on the inflammatory, misleading, populist tweets and speeches of a former U.S. president. Academic studies of former President Trump’s rhetoric are introduced: For example, one study employed the Flesch-Kincaid readability test which focuses on both sentence length and number of syllables to determine register (Spice, 2016, para 6), whereas another utilized a readability analysis of lexical contents and grammatical structure of sentences (Schumacher & Eskenazi, 2016; Spice, 2016, para 6). On the one hand, Mr. Trump’s communicative style was shown to be “significantly more simple [*sic*], and less diverse” than the previous 15 presidents (Shugerman, 2018, p. 1) at the level of a fourth-grade elementary school student (Spice, 2016, para 6). Some mainstream media outlets critiqued Trump harshly because of his communicative style, however, earlier transcripts of his speeches “showed the greatest language variation” during his campaign, indicating that he “worked hard to tailor [his speeches] to appeal to particular audiences” (Sandhu, 2016, para 9). Thus, the implication is that the former president purposefully employed various degrees of simplistic, inflammatory rhetorical styles in his communications for specific ends.

A tweet in which the former president implied that the leader of North Korea is “short” and “fat” (Trump, 2017) shocked students, who commented that personal insults of this nature might be found on a school playground, but not in international politics. In fact, there have been numerous studies of the sheer number of inflammatory communications in which persons and/or races/ethnicities were attacked by the 45th president of the US (Shearer *et al*, 2019, graph 4). Until recently, the data regarding incitement to violence was initially said to be more correlational than causal (Crandall *et al*, 2018; Feinberg *et al*, 2019; Sims Edwards *et al*, 2018). However, the former president has recently been banned from Twitter for “incitement of violence” after alleged involvement in an attempted coup (Twitter, 2021). By studying both the language and the timeline in which it was used, students increase their ability to recognize differences between various levels of register, a skill which will enable them to become more functional citizens in their own country as well as the world.

4. The Module:

This six-week module began with a slideshow focusing on the controversy of Trump’s rhetoric and the difficulties translators have had in dealing with it (Hubscher-Davidson, 2017; Osaki, 2017; Williamson & Gelfand, 2019). Trump’s communications were described by professional translators as being nearly impossible to translate because they are emotive, factually incorrect, and attack individuals and racial and ethnic groups (Hubscher-Davidson, 2017; Osaki, 2017). In fact, translators suffered from moral crises, and one even quit their job because of the ethical dilemmas inherent in translating and propagating such material (Hubscher-Davidson, 2017; Osaki, 2017).

Various examples of Trump’s rhetorical style, known as “Trumpese” (Osaki, 2017) were presented, and students were asked to raise the register to formal level using key techniques. An excerpt of a Trump speech on the border wall was discussed. A speech in which the former president claimed that Mexico was deliberately sending drug dealers, criminals, and rapists to the U.S. (“Transcript...”, 2016) was disproved: In fact, undocumented immigrants commit less crime than U.S. citizens (Barnard, 2020; Light *et al*, 2020). To continue this segue into the CLIL portion of the class, the topic of rhetoric in relation to hate crimes was briefly introduced (when time allowed) (Mercieca, 2020; Mohan 2019, Muller & Schwarz, 2021; Reilly, 2016; Rowland, 2021). Invariably, a few students chose to research this topic further for their final presentations.

5. Written Corrective Feedback vs./and Revising:

The consensus to date may be that Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is not useful in that its application results in little to no improvement in accuracy, particularly in EFL contexts (McGrath, 2021, 7-10). Grading and feedback of written work take a considerable amount of time (McGrath, 2021, 23) and are a burden on instructors. Nonetheless, exercises and longer essays in this module are graded and commented upon in the hopes of increasing student motivation (McGrath, 2021, 25). Students have mentioned verbally and in questionnaires that they appreciate feedback, so that it is deemed valuable enough to continue doing.

The process of revisions in groups is not the same as receiving WCF from the instructor, however, it can be said that in revising sample tweets and speeches, students take on the role of instructor. Through practice, they can later then improve their own work during revisions. Some of the latest research shows that peer revisions are deemed effective (Cui *et al*, 2021). Certainly, group work seems to create a more positive, cohesive class atmosphere.

6. Samples

6.1. Sample Upgrade: From Opinion-as-End to Solution-as-End Writing

Opinion-as-End Student Writing: (Note: Underlined words are too casual, too personal, too emotional, and/or require more precise and academic vocabulary. Concrete data is also necessary.)

“A lot of refugees arrived by boat to Australia. Refugees can’t go home. I was so moved by their struggles. A new program to help them get visas somewhere was made. It was so wonderful!”

Solution-as-End Upgraded Version:

“5043 refugees arrived by boat to Australia in one year. Because of political persecution, they cannot return to their countries of origin. Their struggles to survive are impressive. The Australian government created a new initiative to relocate them to other nations which has been critiqued, for example...”

6.2. Trump’s Speech on the Proposed U.S. Border Wall

Former President Trump planned to build a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico to decrease the numbers of illegal immigrants entering the U.S.

“The opponents are talking \$25 billion for the wall. It’s not going to cost anywhere near that...[unless] I do a super-duper, higher, better, better security, everything else, maybe it goes a little bit more.” (AP News, n.d.)

Sample Upgrade

In teams, students successfully brainstormed improvements including precise vocabulary and sentence structure, for example:

“While opponents claim that the border wall will cost 25\$ to construct, that estimate is too high. If the wall is fortified, heightened, and includes improved security, perhaps the cost may increase slightly.”

6.3. Trump’s Speech on Undocumented Immigrants from Mexico

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you, they’re not sending you, they’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” (BBC News, 2016)

Direct Transliteration into Formal Register

The majority of immigrants sent by Mexico are criminals, however, a minority may be law-abiding [*sic*]. [*Note: This information is factually incorrect (Barnard, 2020; Light et al, 2020), however, it is utilized here as an example of inflammatory, populist rhetoric to indicate why some translators quit their jobs rather than be forced to propagate such material.*]

Transliteration into Factual Statement:

A minority of undocumented immigrants who arrive in the U.S. may have issues with violent crime and/or drugs. However, it can be assumed that the majority are decent,

hardworking people. In fact, data shows that the crime rate for undocumented immigrants is lower than that of U.S. citizens (Barnard, 2020; Light *et al*, 2020).

7. Questionnaire Methodology

An anonymous Google questionnaire was created and posted. Students were given 10 minutes at the beginning of a Zoom meeting to access and respond. The questionnaire was bilingual to minimize interference caused by L1, L2, and in some cases, L3 issues. The results were anonymous, and, naturally, participation had no effect on students' scores in the class.

8. Discussion of the Results

8.1 Multiple choice questions on personal data:

89.5% of the students were first year students (Question 1) and came from 11 different department (Question 2). In Question 3, 96.3% of students reported that their first language is Japanese, with the other languages represented being Chinese, Cantonese, Mongolian, Korean, and Vietnamese.

Surprisingly, students had difficulty reporting on their English levels, with 56.6% stating in Question 4 that they do not know what their current level is—even though TOEFL tests are administered on campus twice a year and the students have had to pass a difficult entrance exam in order to enter the university in the first place.

This university is known for its large, reputable medical and engineering departments, and therefore as per current conditions in Japan, the student ratio skews male, with 72.1% of students being male overall (Question 5).

8.2 Multiple choice questions on the module:

Question 6 asked students whether vocabulary hints sheets were helpful for their learning. 78.6% answered effective to extremely effective (Choice 4 and 5 on the Likert scale).

Question 7 asked whether the sentence-level practice exercises were effective. 82.1% answered that they were effective to very effective. The 10% difference here may be attributed to the fact that there was less time spent in Zoom lessons on the hint worksheets. In in-person classes, there were game-like brainstorming activities to make vocabulary activities more memorable and meaningful, but these activities proved impossible to run effectively in Zoom meetings.

Question 8. asked students whether the focus on presidential English was useful to their learning, and 67.7% answered that it was effective to very effective. There was only one student comment dealing with this aspect of the module and it was positive, so that it is difficult to discern the reasons for the lower evaluation in Question 8. Difficulty may be a factor since some students commented upon this point in the free comments section (Question 11).

Question 9 asked if students felt that writing an academic essay helped to improve their

skills, and 81.7% noted that it did (effective to very effective on the Likert scale). The students had not yet received WCF on the mid-term essays at the time the questionnaires were administered, so that it is difficult to determine if WCF would have positively or negatively affected their assessments of their improvements.

Regarding the soft CLIL content of linguistics, identity, migration and globalization, the results for Question 10 were also positive with 82.1% deeming the class content meaningful to very meaningful (Choice 4 and 5 on the Likert scale).

Questions 6-10 were quite general, but it was hoped that students would offer individual comments in the open-ended question (Q11) regarding specific successes or failures for any sections of the module upon which they chose to comment.

8.3 Question 11: Comments

In Question 11., 34 students included comments. Given that the student makeup is so diverse, it may be difficult to extrapolate tendencies from the limited data. Nonetheless, a few main themes emerged regarding academic English and CLIL. Representative comments are included here. [Note: Comments are unedited, however, the Japanese comments have been translated into English.]

Academic English (Representative comments sampled from approximately 10 comments):

基本的にアカデミックライティングに対して苦手意識を持っていたのが、いろいろな例を交えて具体的に書き方を指示されたことで非常に書きやすさを感じることができた。 [Basically, I was not good at academic writing, but I was able to feel that it was very easy to write because I was instructed to write concretely with various examples.]

Altering casual languages into formal one was an interesting activity to me, because I had never come to think that presidents, who represent the nation, have diversities in their speech, though all of them use English.

CLIL: (Representative comments sampled from approximately 6 comments)

Topics of your English class are very advanced and important, so I could get the knowledge of not only English, but also the topics. I'm glad that I could learn important social problems in English. 英語も社会問題も学べる一石二鳥の授業でした！ [It was a class of 'two birds, one stone' where you can learn about both English and social issues!]

Comments on difficulty (Representative comments sampled from approximately 6 Comments)

日本語でもアカデミックな文章を書くのが難しいので、況や英語をや。 [It's difficult to write academic sentences even in Japanese, so I'm not sure about the situation in English.]

8.4 Unique comments:

One student expressed concern about using appropriate expressions when discussing ethnic or racial issues. Another student wrote that they were concerned with neutrality [Note: Students were asked to be aware of the various biases evident in the videos and articles used (i.e., pro- or anti-immigration, nationalistic, neoliberal, Western-centric, etc.) by employing “sophisticated thinking” (Smiley, 2019, 22).]

8.5 Summary of other comments:

One student asked the professor to tell other students to speak in English during breakout room activities so that they could practice effectively. In fact, Zoom does not allow for monitoring all breakout rooms at the same time, which makes it possible for students to lapse into speaking their first language, or to not participate at all. A solution is to have students compile answers on documents during Zoom, but there has been cheating in that case as well, which decreases the meaningfulness of an activity and can be demotivating for both students and instructors.

9. Study Limitations

Overall, the students were quite positive in their responses, yet few offered detailed comments. In particular, the exercise in which students work in groups to upgrade presidential English was one of the unique points of the module, so that more detailed responses would have been useful. Samples of student writing certainly seem to indicate that it has been an effective module since the majority of students attempted to employ the techniques of upgrading writing style in their homework and mid-term essays.

When this module was taught pre-pandemic, students were not allowed to access dictionaries or the internet during group work in the physical classroom on campus. However, in online classes, students who “cheat” by choosing to use translation software will seem to have mastered register, but those who communicate sincerely using their existing English will perhaps seem less adept. The issue of whether to allow the use of translation software and to teach students how to use online tools is beyond the scope of this paper: Machine Translation is deemed effective for learning in some contexts (Lee, 2019) and requires further research.

Perhaps the topic of presidential rhetoric will soon be outdated. In that case, this specific CLIL module could be used successfully only with students studying translation, political science (i.e., immigration issues), and so forth, rather than general education English classes. Moreover, it must be

acknowledged that this module would be difficult to replicate in other classroom situations with students of lower English levels and/or motivation.

Nonetheless, the vocabulary upgrade and solution-as-end report writing exercises could easily be adapted to suit the needs of other university students in Japan.

10. Conclusions and Implications

As Nishida noted in her study (2021, 263), this sort of class material is not available in textbook form for students at this level. Therefore, it takes a great deal of time and effort for instructors to create materials. Nishida (2021, 265) suggests teacher networks for material sharing and support.

More study on the vast array of influences upon the success of soft CLIL classes is necessary. Motivation, self-awareness, and self-regulation by students become especially important regarding the use of machine translation in academic writing courses. Contrasting MT-free activities with MT-assisted activities could further empower students with the experience they need to utilize technology in their futures as citizens in a digital, globalized world.

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