

# **ADDRESSING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CLIL INTO JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

## **LA SUPERACION DE LAS BARRERAS SOCIO-CULTURALES EN LAS ESCUELAS PRIMARIAS JAPONESAS CON LA INTRODUCCION DE AICLE**

MARTIN PARSONS

mp@hannan-u.ac.jp

HANNAN UNIVERSITY (OSAKA, JAPAN)

RANDY MUTH

rmuth@kio.ac.jp

KIO UNIVERSITY (NARA, JAPAN)

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### **1. Point of departure and objective**

The aim of this presentation is to explain the current situation of foreign language teaching, specifically English (ESL), in Japan, with particular reference to the introduction of ESL classes to primary schools. During the presentation we will briefly explore the historical background of English language education in Japan, contextualizing the present policies regarding ESL in public primary schools. In addition, we will discuss the possibility of the adoption of CLIL as a way of dealing with some of the objections raised to the introduction of English in the current initiative, focusing primarily on the socio-cultural and socio-economic factors particular to Japan.

## **2. Context**

In Japan, English is an essential element of all university entrance examinations as well as the majority of high school entrance examinations, making English language instruction compulsory at lower and upper secondary levels. Given the importance still attached to attending a well-regarded university in Japan with respect to employment opportunities, a great number of pupils supplement English classes provided in regular school curriculums with extra lessons at evening and weekend cram schools, and accordingly, many teachers of English feel obligated to rely upon the so-called “*yaku-doku*” (grammar-translation) method to enable their pupils to pass these tests (Gorsuch, 1998; Guest, 2000; Takagi, 2001).

This focus on grammar and reading is often cited as one of the main reasons for the relatively poor performance by Japanese on international tests of English. For example, Japanese scores for the TOEFL Internet-Based Test have long ranked among the lowest in the world in country by country comparisons (ETS, 2011). Recent policy initiatives, including the JET (Japan Exchange Teaching) which includes the integration of native speaking assistant language teachers into English classes and compulsory oral communication English lesson in high schools, both introduced in the end of the 1980's, and the Action Plan to “cultivate Japanese who can use English”, announced in 2003, have attempted to encourage more communicative approaches to ESL instruction and learning.

In the 2011 academic year, Foreign Language Activities (essentially English) became compulsory for all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils and, in contrast to secondary school ESL education, there is a strong emphasis on developing communication abilities as the goal of these classes (MEXT).

## **3. National and international references**

A number of criticisms have been raised about the introduction of ESL classes to primary school. Among them are concerns regarding the amount of time in the curriculum, concerns that focusing on English at a young age may adversely affect

pupils' ability in their mother tongue, concerns about the transition from primary school to secondary school and the lack of pre- and in-service language education training for primary school teachers.

The positive results achieved by CLIL programmes around the world indicate that CLIL may offer a solution to several of these concerns. However, while CLIL in various formats has been adopted throughout the world in recent decades, it remains largely unknown in Japan. If CLIL approaches and programmes were to be introduced into Japanese education and have a chance to realise their potential, financial, historical, and socio-cultural factors particular to Japanese society will need to be addressed.

#### **4. Implementation**

There are numerous positive aspects of Japanese society that may facilitate the introduction of CLIL to primary schools. For example, the high importance Japanese place on education is reflected in the resources dedicated to extra-curricular study in cram schools, many of which are dedicated to studying English. Japanese primary schools in particular have long been praised internationally for the quality of education and attention to the needs of pupils provided (Lee, Graham & Stevenson, 1998; White, 1987). Teachers are also highly motivated, hardworking and enjoy a highly respected position in the community.

However, the kind of issues that would need to be dealt with if CLIL approaches were to be successfully implemented in Japanese primary schools tend to be socio-cultural in nature. A major problem is the prevailing ESL educational culture in Japan, coupled to the lack of training in language education for teachers. These problems may potentially lead new primary school ESL programmes to simply mirror secondary programmes, which lean heavily on grammar-translation methods. Teachers themselves are extremely anxious about the new addition to the curriculum, and few believe they have the knowledge or skills to achieve good results.

There is also a strong vertical hierarchical structure to Japanese society, typified by *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) relationships (Hendry, 2003; Nakane, 1984), which can make bottom-up innovation difficult to achieve. Japanese social interaction is traditionally centred on the avoidance of embarrassment (Benedict, 1954), creating a

classroom atmosphere in which the teacher is seen as the arbiter and transmitter of knowledge, and which may not be conducive to communicative language learning.

On the other hand, rather than looking at these social phenomenon as difficulties to be overcome, examining ways in which they can be incorporated into a CLIL approach may yield benefits. For example, teachers spend a great deal of time with pupils outside of class on extra-curricula activities, like sport and cultural clubs. These activities, in which pupils of varying ages (i.e., *senpai-kohai*) interact in a less formal environment, may offer a window of opportunity for introducing CLIL.

## 5. Evaluation, future prospects and conclusions

In spite of Japan's limited past success in establishing effective foreign language teaching programmes, there is potential to find Japan-specific solutions to this situation. This potential lies in the human and physical resources available, the high regard for education in society, and a strong awareness of the importance of English competence in an increasingly competitive labour market. CLIL may offer a way to activate that potential in ESL education in Japanese primary schools. However the successful introduction of CLIL programmes will be contingent upon appropriately negotiating the socio-cultural and socio-economic issues outlined in this presentation.

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