FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' VOICES IN ONLINE CLIL PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The absence of specific language learning regulation at university levels gives ways for instructors to implement various teaching methods. Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is among the teaching methods that apply a dual-focused teaching approach where learning process focuses on content knowledge and language skills. This study aims to investigate Foreign Language for Specific Purposes (FLSP) instructors' priority in foreign language teaching along with the benefits and barriers of online learning. Qualitative methodology was employed with interview (n=8) technique and multiple case-study analyses. Results showed that instructors felt that the given ready-use materials on Canvas platform were beneficial for online classes, although modifications were required. Language skills were prioritized over the content language due to students' needs and competences. However, instructors reported that online learning is less effective than offline learning regardless instructional methods they applied. These findings implied that language-lead CLIL or soft-CLIL can be implemented in higher education to provide both content and language learning for students. Yet, CLIL training and professional development for FLSP instructors are highly required to provide more effective remote CLIL practices.

Keywords: CLIL, content knowledge, FLSP, language skills, online learning

1. Introduction

The ongoing growth of English as the language of instruction in higher education is influenced by several factors such as internationalization and global competitions. Hence, some universities offer English competence as the added value for their graduates. For this purpose, the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is suggested in the practices of language learning in higher education. CLIL combine the teaching and learning of specific university's major with a wide range of language skills to prepare students for their future careers or become academic experts. The absence of specific language learning regulation at university levels gives ways for the instructors to implement various teaching methods. CLIL is among the applied teaching methods that refer to a dual-focused teaching approach where learning process is focused on both content and language learning. It calls for the integration of language and content in language learning at the tertiary level.

Mehisto et al. (2008) and van Kampen et al., (2018) stated that teachers should put careful consideration in planning CLIL activities and have sufficient knowledge in conducting the assessment. CLIL is not easy to implement and takes considerable effort in real practices, especially when it comes to online learning.

Moreover, the incorporation of ICT into education today calls for the rigorous assessments of students' online learning.

Teachers are forced to adapt to new learning platforms that neither allow them to physically monitor students' progress, nor ensure that students' learning enhancement are resulted from their own efforts (Kearns, 2012). This condition requires specified assessment methods specifically design for online learning to allow teachers monitor the improvement from students' learning.

There has been an enormous number of studies concerning the successful implementation of CLIL in higher education (Arham & Akrab, 2018; Izzah et al., 2018; Sarip et al., 2018; Wijirahayu, 2019). However, only few studies discuss the assessment for both learning process and students' progress, especially during online learning. Studies related to how students are assessed or what CLIL assessments are about during the teaching and learning process have been underexplored (Lo & Fung, 2018; Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2018). Thus, this research formulates research questions including (1) How do FLSP instructors integrate CLIL in their online teaching and learning activities? and (2) How are FLSP instructors' experiences in assessing students' progress in their online teaching and learning activities?

2. Literature review

The definition of CLIL and its corporation within FLSP

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) refers to any kind of pedagogical approach incorporating content teaching and learning and second/ foreign languages (L2) (Coyle et al., 2010; Lopes, 2020; Meyer et al., 2015). As far as its role in the curriculum is concerned, CLIL can refer to teaching one or more subjects through L2 and may also refer to content-based subjects in language programmes (Cenoz, 2015). Meanwhile, Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (FLSP) refers to a language program carried out by Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia. It offers intensive learning of English, Chinese, and Arabic in responses to the students' needs of foreign language mastery within their two first semesters in the university. However, English is predominantly taught where most students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang are studying at general majors that require English as the most spoken foreign language. In this research, the implementation of CLIL within FLSP is specified to the English language learning where the language skills are divided into Speaking, Integrated Reading and Grammar, and Listening. The term FLSP is consistently used in this research and referring to English language learning with English as the language of instruction.

In his study, Leonardi (2015) found an explicit correlation between FLSP and CLIL in higher education. FLSP and CLIL inherently share some similar key features, including 1) the use of context from different non-linguistic subjects; 2) the use of communicative language teaching methodology; and 3) the development of academic and communication skills. Hence, teaching CLIL and teaching FLSP is generally the same as both emphasize teaching language skills and professional skills. In example, the design of CLIL teaching materials is based on the need analysis of FLSP. FLSP instructors further use the results from the need analysis to prepare the learning activities. Ultimately, the designed learning activities should focus on both academic and communicative needs, scaffold learners' language development, and facilitate peer collaboration. Hence, the integration between language and content in FLSP teaching enable teachers to design more relevant teaching materials (Yang, 2016).

It can be concluded that English language learning in higher education could benefit from a gradual and mutual collaboration between FLSP and CLIL. Some shared key features of FLSP and CLIL imply that certain features of CLIL could be introduced through FLSP courses. In this case, teachers should use authentic exposure to the real-life context for both language and content learning. FLSP Reading skill, for example, is not only taught for the purposes of reading comprehension, but is also for its incorporation with other skills that provide content learning. The

implementation of CLIL within this Reading skill promotes access to subject-specific L2 vocabulary, which leads to easier understanding of texts in the target language. In conclusion, CLIL tools and techniques could be used by FLSP courses to adapt content and language practices in an effort to optimize, promote and encourage successful language learning in higher education (Chostelidou & Griva, 2014).

Challenges when traditional CLIL classroom is brought to online learning

The current pandemic of Covid-19 has brought many challenges to various sectors in our daily activities. Education is amongst the most-impacted sectors where practices of traditional learning through face-to-face meeting are forced to shift into full virtual mode. In this case, conventional assessment applied in traditional schooling does not translate well into online learning (Kearns, 2012). Much previous research has documented challenges faced by teachers, including in the higher education, concerning the effectiveness of online learning and the assessment toward students' progress (Febrianto et al., 2020; Hamid et al., 2020; Irfan et al., 2020; Ro'fah et al., 2020). These studies similarly show that teachers faced difficulty in assessing students' progress and monitor their learning improvement as they are not equipped by adequate skills and knowledge in carrying out full online teaching. This is against the current contention where online teaching and learning activity were predicted to enhance the practices of modern education since it does not acknowledge physical barriers of space and time (Barbosa & Garcia, 2005).

On the other hand, little has been known about the enablers of the implementation of online assessment in higher education. Lestiyanawati & Widyantoro (2020) specifically found that online learning during this pandemic era has ignited teachers' creative strategy, in which they make positive use of the wide range of online learning platforms available. Many assessment methods were crafted and applied, following the practices of online learning that support flexibility and self-scaffolding that are in line with the spirit of independent learning. It is argued that physical evaluation is not the sole essential factor in an assessment as long as students' progress are monitored and reported continuously (Dhawan, 2020). Hence, it is of particular interest of this research to document teachers' positive experiences on online learning practices to document sample of best practices that can contribute to the improvement of effective online learning in the future.

3. Methodology

Research design

This present research applied qualitative design with interview technique and thematic analysis. Such technique and analysis can help researchers explore the existing phenomena to gain understandings within a specific context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This fit the aims of this present study to illustrate lecturers' experiences in the integration of CLIL in FLSP learning.

Data collection

Announcements of participant recruitment, which consisted of research objectives, participants' inclusive criteria, and researchers' contacts, were distributed through language instructors' What's App group in a private university in Malang. Instructors who wished to take parts in this study were free to approach the researchers. The selected participants were interviewed through Zoom and Skype, and recorded upon participants' consents.

Each interview took 30-40 minutes following a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interview was chosen because it takes into account the values of Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy to facilitate authentic and dialogical talk in educational research (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The interview protocol was crafted to allow participants elaborate and reflect on their own answers (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and let researchers probe and build further questions based on participants' answers (Adams, 2015).

Hence, the protocol consisted of 10 question items concerning instructors'

priority in teaching FLSP. Among the item samples are *what are your priority in FLSP learning* and *why do you think (language skills/ content knowledge) is more important than (language skills/ content knowledge).* We mostly incorporated *how* and *why* to invite participants' genuine opinions and avoid yes/no answers.

Participants

Convenience sampling was employed as a part of non-probability sampling method (Cohen et al., 2018) where clear logistics and resources benefit in terms of travel, cost, and time expenditure (Galloway, 2005). Eight participants were recruited following the inclusion criteria of: 1) FLSP instructors; and 2) had taught at least two semesters (one full year course) of online FLSP learning. This sampling method set a scope and limitation on our study where the results are not generalizable to the population.

Data analysis

The obtained data was analyzed using thematic analysis to gather similar findings reflecting particular themes to answer the research questions (Peel, 2020). Our study applied the eight steps of thematic analysis in educational research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) that covers:

1. Data familiarization: the recorded interviews were transcribed manually to obtain data corpus. This resulted in the mapping of participants' demography and transcriptions of the whole interview results.

2. Code generation: statements in the transcriptions were analyzed and coded to identify participants' name, age, department, faculty, understanding on CLIL, understanding on language skills, online FLSP teaching practices, and other concerns.

3. Theme search: series of codes resulted from the previous process were considered as sub-themes. Hence, similar sub-themes were grouped to obtain major themes.

Three major themes were generated, named in participants' demography, choices of CLIL or language skills, and online FLSP teaching practices.

4. Theme review: the three major themes were reviewed to answer the research questions. At this stage, the relationship between themes were analyzed, for example, how participants' understanding might influence their FLSP teaching.

5. Theme definition: two major themes were defined as the focus of this study, namely: a) instructors' choices on CLIL versus language skills, and b) instructors' practices on online FLSP teaching.

6. Report production: wrapped up the whole analysis results prior to the writing of findings and discussion parts.

FINDINGS

A total of eight instructors participated in this study interviewed in August 2021. The initial screening of data indicated that all eight instructors were teaching FLSP across departments and faculties, and had carried out online teaching for two semesters in a private university in Malang. All participants were given pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality and integrity of the research. Two main findings pertaining instructors' knowledge on CLIL and language skills, and online FLSP teaching practices emanated in this study.

Instructors' choices between content knowledge and language skills in their online CLIL practice

It was found that most instructors prioritized students' language skills over the integration of content knowledge into language learning.

Mostly, the instructors stated that both content knowledge and language skills are equally important. However, in their teaching practices especially in online learning, they provoked diverse reasons to prioritize language skills instead of the content knowledge. Take an example, James

considered that the students did not have sufficient background of their content knowledge. Hence, it is difficult for him to teach content knowledge as stated in the following excerpt:

> *"Both of language and content knowledge are important. Yet, in my FLSP classes, I emphasized more on language learning. It is difficult to concern on students' content knowledge, since the students are still in semester 1, they do not have sufficient background knowledge. (James)*

Similar to James, Debora also presumed that she found difficult to prioritize content knowledge due to two reasons. First, the students have limited time in online learning. Second, the students have no access to printed FLSP books. This FLSP basically is designed in multiple cooperation among the instructors, editors and the head of department. Debora believed that face-to-face classroom using printed materials were more convenient and more effective to teach the content knowledge. It is proved by the following statement.

> *"I think both, language skill and content knowledge. However, it will be possible for f2f classroom. During the online learning, language skills is more prioritized since there is limited time, and the students do not have access to FLSP books." (Debora)*

Meanwhile, two instructors claimed that even though they taught language skills more frequently, they still tried to integrate the topic discussed based on the students' major. It is based on the designed syllabus and the students' need as well. Lia and Ella stated their explanations as follows.

> *"Mostly, I prioritized the language. But, I also tried to design the topic of the tasks related to the students' department, such as IT department, the students were asked to promote IT product or IT software." (Ella)*

> *"Based on students' needs and current learning objectives/ syllabus. Content*

> *knowledge for FLSP 1, language skills for FLSP 2." (Lia)*

Additionally, Joseph added that it is immensely hard to integrate the content knowledge in his classes since the students' English competence was in beginner level. So, he decided to teach language rather that the content as his explanation stated below.

> *"[I always teach] Language skills. Once, I tried practicing [to teach] content knowledge but [it] didn't work. Students' proficiency was quite low. (Joseph)*

Above all, only Aan confidently to stated that he prioritized the content knowledge since he believed that FLSP program is designed for non-English department students. So, he tried to put more emphasize on content leaning.

> *"Content knowledge, because it's English for non-English Dept students." (Aan)*

Practices on online FLSP teaching

This present study found that most instructors reported difficulties in online teaching compared to conventional face-to-face practices.

Two major issues contributed to the difficulties faced by the instructors in their online classroom including (1) the online platform and materials; (2) the process of assessment. The first is regarding the online platform and learning materials. The instructors agreed that they were firstly skeptical and not surely ready with online learning due to unpredictable shifting from face-to-face learning to fully online learning. Hence, they chose the teaching and learning platform that they, as instructors, and their students were familiar the most. They mostly used WhatsApp, email and google classroom. The situation is described in the following excerpt.

"in the early Covid-19 outbreaks, I used google classroom and wa group. Then, the next semester, I used LMS (canvas designed by LC)" (Debora)

"using WhatsApp (video call and voice note feature), and email." (James)

"… I use Google classroom before Canvas [ready to use after one semester online learning]. Canvas is a complete blueprint that can be modified. The concept and structuring of Canvas were based on multiple coordination among instructors." (Aan)

From those statements, it implied that the instructors basically were not prepared for online learning, as well as the institution (Language Center). Hence, they chose their own platform. After one semester, the institution provided ready-use platform called canvas, along with its prepared materials for the whole semester. However, the instructors needed to double-check and modify the materials to fit with their students' need and competence.

"Canvas, sometimes modify, sometimes follow. I do not feel confident to craft the whole syllabus as it may not suit campus' learning objectives, which is TAEP. (Mimi)

"[I] mostly use the given materials [on canvas], it is already in line with the students' need. However, some topics are too general. Hence, I modify the topic in order to make it in line with my students' department" (Debora)

"I also add more application for learning and enganging students' [interest] in learning process such as using mentimeter, kahoot, quizzes. The materials are laso modified based on the students' need." (Stephen)

"I only modify levels of difficulties based on students' proficiency. Sometimes too difficult tasks were not given if that was only hampering students' development…" (Joseph)

The second obstacle is related to assessment.

Grammar: task-based, Speaking: video call, not much different from offline. The most challenging is listening where we cannot monitor students' real-time (Mimi)

None. Actually we can do AfL, but that is against the learning objectives of introducing basic English to non-English Dept students. Our main job is scoring students' outcomes, and we don't have that specific set of skills to perform AfL. (Aan)

None. Did AfL for Integrated class, especially when the learning objectives is closely related to FLSP teaching. For Integrated, even did team teaching and used diagnostic test to structure learning materials. Mostly AoL because the current learning objectives is TAEP. The pandemic doesn't allow the ideal use of AfL.

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