

Student attitudes towards Content-Based Instruction in an English medium British Studies class

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Abstract

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is a subject of increasing interest in Japan with the growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI). CBI is defined as “the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche as cited in Brown and Bradford, 2017). In this English medium British Studies class, students were asked for their impressions of, and attitudes towards, learning English and of various tasks that they performed in English in the course of the class. Although the small sample size and lack of a control group studying content in Japanese, or studying language in a traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class makes definitive conclusions about CBI hard to draw, some pedagogical implications for future editions of this class and suggestions for further study are discussed.

Keywords

CBI British Studies CLIL EMI Student Attitudes

Introduction

In recent years, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has grown in Japan, given impetus by national level drives towards internationalization in Japanese universities (Brown, 2017). Figures from the ministry of education showed that 262 universities, just over 1/3 of all universities in Japan, offered some undergraduate EMI in 2013, an increase from 171 universities eight years previously. Brown further identifies that different stakeholders may have different, often implicit, understandings of the reason for implementing such EMI programs. Issues such as whether content specialists or English language teachers teach the course have an impact on whether primacy is given to the teaching of content or to improvements in language competency through opportunities for meaningful English language use.

Considering these questions, it is of clear interest to understand students’ attitudes towards the course overall as well as some of the tasks that they are required to do through the medium of English. In European contexts (for example Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2009) some researchers felt that attitudinal studies in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), closely related to EMI, had been neglected as compared to themes such as linguistic competence, content subject competence, and intercultural competence.

The focus of the current study is to investigate students' attitudes towards a British Studies course taught through EMI, as well as towards some regular tasks in class conducted in English, English language learning as a whole, and comparative attitudes towards Britain and Japan themselves.

Literature review

EMI, CBI and CLIL

Hellekjaer (2010) states that EMI is commonly defined as a non-language course taught in English as a foreign language. Brown and Bradford (2017) identify a 1991 special edition of the Japan Association for Language Teachers (JALT) publication *The Language Teacher* focused on Content Based Instruction (CBI) as showing how language students in Japan have been exposed to content delivered in English for some time. CBI is defined as “the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche as cited in Brown and Bradford, 2017). Suzuki et al. (2017) note that a fundamental difference between CBI and EMI is that in CBI the content is intended to serve as a vehicle for language use and teaching. EMI does not offer any deliberate language instruction yet one of the drivers for its growth in Japanese universities may well be to increase opportunities for meaningful English language use by students, as the severely limited use of English inside and outside the classroom is seen as one of the major problems for English language learning in Japan. A further concept to be aware of is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Brown and Bradford (2017) note that this is viewed by many teachers in Japan as synonymous with CBI and that vagueness and overly broad use of these terms is a problem even in the research community.

The use of EMI is identified by Suzuki et al as being rooted in European university education, specifically the Bologna process beginning in 1999 with the aim of ensuring comparability between quality and standards of higher-education qualifications between European countries. The use of EMI in some courses in non-English speaking European countries was seen as necessary to promote internationalization given the role of English in transnational research. Dearden and Macaro (2016) describe it as “an umbrella term for subjects taught through English” making “no direct reference to the aim of improving students' English.” In theory, a term this broad could encompass both CBI and CLIL but Brown and Bradford (2017) state that the central role of subject-content mastery should be considered a distinguishing feature of EMI. EMI courses can range from a sink or swim approach where students are expected to function as near native speakers of the language of instruction to approaches with a sensitivity to students' current language levels and an awareness of an implicit goal of improving students' language skills.

CLIL by contrast is identified by Marsh (2008) as a term launched in 1996 “to denote a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language.” Its origins lie more in secondary level education, equivalent to Junior High or High School

education in Japan. Brown and Bradford identify that through a strong research agenda and faculty training a more well-defined method for CLIL teaching has emerged than in either EMI or CBI. Brown and Bradford's (2017) attempt to offer updated definitions of these overlapping terms identifies assessment of both language and content, opportunities for meaningful input and output in the second language (L2) and meaningful engagement with L2 content as distinguishing features.

CBI draws heavily on Krashen's (1981) comprehensible input theory and was inspired by Canadian French immersion programs and bilingual education initiatives in the United States (Brown and Bradford, 2017). As mentioned above, the 1991 special edition of *The Language Teacher* gives some indication of how CBI had an impact in language teaching practice in Japan predating more recent educational policy drives towards greater internationalization of Japanese universities. Brinton, Snow and Wesche's wide-ranging definition encompasses almost any academic subject matter delivered in a second or foreign language. One influential framework in EFL literature is a three-model framework where CBI classes can predominantly be content classes taught with a sensitivity to the students' language needs, parallel content and language classes with the language classes acting as support to the academic subject-matter classes, or a theme-based model with language classes taught by a language teacher based on themes related to subject-matter content rather than a syllabus organized by language features. Brown and Bradford argue that the discussions of definitions of CBI refer to a dual focus but often quickly switch to a discussion where language learning is a clear priority. They say that the theme-based model is dominant. This paper takes CBI to be defined by Brinton, Snow and Wesche's more inclusive definition, and the British Studies class in which the study was conducted aligns far more to the content class with awareness of the students' language needs model of CBI. Although as the instructor for the class, the fact that I predominantly teach language and communication skills classes in English informs the approach, my MA in History also informs the way that the content in an interdisciplinary subject that encompasses humanities and social sciences disciplines is delivered.

Students' attitudes

A number of studies of students' attitudes towards EMI in Japanese universities or studies of particular skills required to successfully complete EMI classes have been conducted. Suzuki et al (2017) investigated students' attitudes towards EMI instruction and L2 speaking, concluding that students' did not find any aspects of the tasks in EMI classes that they found frustrating compared to the researchers' predetermined threshold, a finding that they speculated might be explained by the data collection taking place after at least nine weeks of classes when students had accumulated successful experiences with the classroom activities. There was a finding that although no aspects were frustrating relative to the researchers' threshold, students were more satisfied with their comprehension than their spontaneous speech production. Uchihara and Harada (2018) look at EMI course students' self-perceptions in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and its' relationship to vocabulary knowledge. Their recommendations included how students with insufficient

aural vocabulary appreciated various types of language support when listening to content in the EMI class. Crawford (2020) studied students' attitudes to collaboration in notetaking in listening to lectures in academic English contexts, identifying note-taking in English to be a key skill for learning subject-matter in an EMI course.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were students ($n = 21$) studying an EMI British Studies class at a private university in Japan. The class was taken in the Global Communication department, which runs an EMI undergraduate program with a study abroad period of a minimum of 6 weeks at an institution in an English-speaking country in students' second year of study. Participants were a largely homogeneous group of first language Japanese speakers with only one exception, an international student whose first language was English. 18 students were freshmen students with one second year student and two third year students. The participants were also predominantly female ($n = 18$) with just three male students.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the 12th and 13th week of a 15 lesson course over one semester which met once a week. A questionnaire was distributed as homework in the 12th lesson. Students submitted the questionnaire in the 13th lesson when they also were given an explanation of the research and given the opportunity to give informed consent for the data collected from the homework to be used in the research. The questionnaire was a seven-point semantic differential questionnaire similar to the one used by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2009) which was in turn based on Gardner (1985). Students were presented with a pair of antonyms to describe their attitudes towards the course as a whole, a particular course activity, learning English as a whole and also their attitudes towards Britain and Japan. An example of this type of item would be as follows:

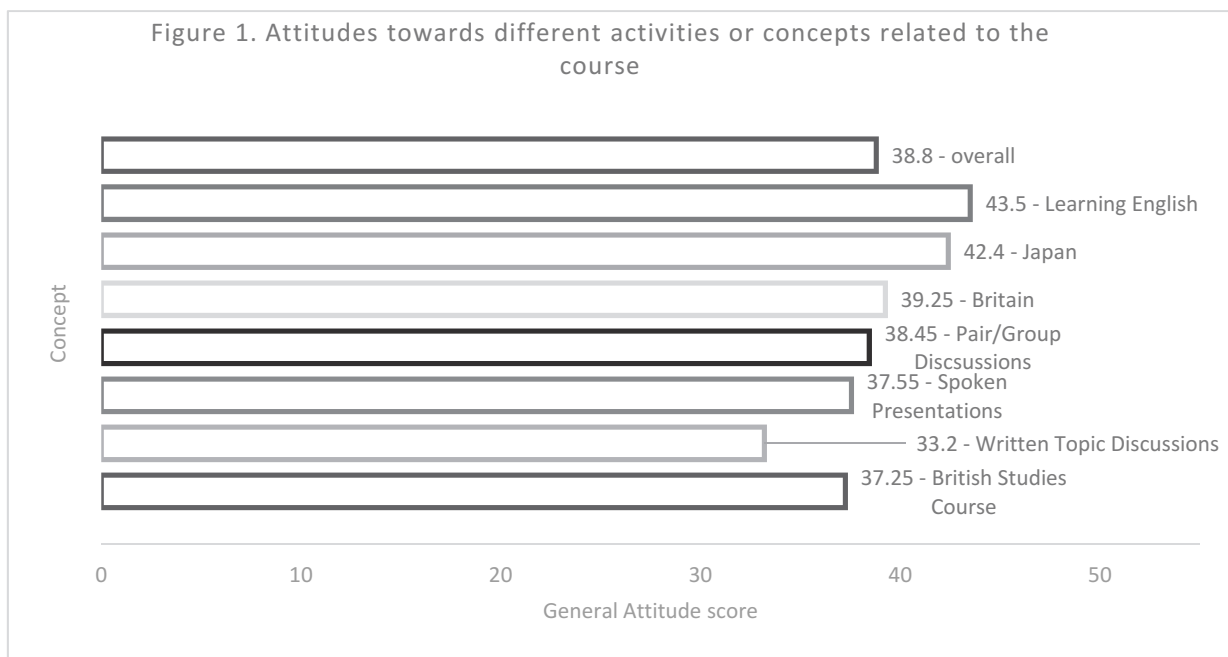
British Studies course

Awful ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ **Nice**

Students were asked to mark an 'X' on the part of the scale that most accurately reflected their attitude to the British Studies course. If these adjectives did not relate to their feelings about the British Studies course they were instructed to mark an 'X' in the middle of the scale.

Results

Students' responses were summed up for each item in the first instance to build a picture of the degree to which they were generally positive or negative about the item. The findings are summarized below (Figure 1)



In general terms, among the activities that took place in class, students were much more positive towards doing speaking activities, whether presentations or discussions, than they were about discussing a topic in writing. They generally had more positive attitudes towards what we might arguably consider more abstract ideas like Britain, Japan or Learning English than specific types of classroom activity that they experienced regularly in the course or the British Studies course itself. Nonetheless, all of these represented a mean of higher than 4 on the seven-point scale. The overall reaction to the concepts was towards the positive end of the scales.

Table 1 breaks down the students' attitudes to Learning English, Japan and Britain by each different adjective pair that was included in the questionnaire.

Table 1

Attitudes towards Britain, Japan and Learning English

	CONCEPT	MEAN	S.D.
Nice	Britain	5.85	0.99
	Japan	5.95	1.23
	Learning English	6.15	1.04
Necessary	Britain	5.10	1.65
	Japan	5.75	1.07
	Learning English	6.20	1.06
Easy	Britain	2.50	1.32

	Japan	4.40	1.54
	Learning English	2.15	1.31
Appealing	Britain	4.90	1.45
	Japan	5.15	1.27
	Learning English	5.20	1.54
Pleasant	Britain	4.90	1.25
	Japan	5.10	1.17
	Learning English	5.35	1.23
Important	Britain	5.25	1.52
	Japan	5.30	1.42
	Learning English	6.40	0.82
Useful	Britain	5.40	1.23
	Japan	5.05	1.54
	Learning English	6.20	1.32
Interesting	Britain	5.35	1.31
	Japan	5.70	1.08
	Learning English	5.85	0.93

With the exception of the adjective easy, learning English is clearly the concept that participants have the most positive attitude about. Learning English scores highest in all other seven adjective pairs with scores over 6 on both useful and important. Japan also scores higher than Britain in all adjective pairs except useful-useless where Britain scores higher.

Table 2 gives the same breakdown but this time for the British Studies Course and the regular activities of a ten-minute written discussion of a topic, spoken presentations in class and speaking English in pair/group discussions.

Table 2

Attitudes towards the British Studies course, written discussions of a topic, spoken presentations in class and speaking English in pair/group discussions

	CONCEPT	MEAN	S.D.
Nice	British Studies course	5.25	1.21
	Written discussions	4.40	1.73
	Spoken presentations	5.40	1.10

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	Speaking in discussions	5.15	1.42
Necessary	British Studies course	5.10	1.21
	Written discussions	4.75	1.59
	Spoken presentations	5.45	1.36
	Speaking in discussions	5.35	1.57
Easy	British Studies course	2.25	1.80
	Written discussions	2.10	1.21
	Spoken presentations	2.65	1.31
	Speaking in discussions	2.85	1.57
Appealing	British Studies course	4.80	1.06
	Written discussions	4.05	1.10
	Spoken presentations	4.40	0.94
	Speaking in discussions	4.60	1.35
Pleasant	British Studies course	4.60	1.39
	Written discussions	3.50	1.43
	Spoken presentations	4.00	1.26
	Speaking in discussions	4.85	1.27
Important	British Studies course	5.45	1.10
	Written discussions	5.05	1.15
	Spoken presentations	5.25	1.45
	Speaking in discussions	5.20	1.51
Useful	British Studies course	4.85	1.42
	Written discussions	4.90	1.41
	Spoken presentations	5.50	1.00
	Speaking in discussions	5.55	1.28
Interesting	British Studies course	4.95	1.19
	Written discussions	4.45	1.50
	Spoken presentations	4.90	1.29
	Speaking in discussions	4.90	1.41

As with the general attitudes, the ten-minute written discussion of a topic had a lower positive score in almost every adjective pairing than the other class activities and the course as a whole. The only exception was a slightly higher score for useful than the British Studies course but only by 0.05 and students' attitudes towards its usefulness were still less positive than both types of speaking activity. The score of 2.1 for written

discussions on the easy-hard pair of adjectives was the most negative attitude score across all seven concepts and eight adjective pairings. Although learning English also received a similar low score (2.15, see Table 1) in this pairing, the overall positive attitude to learning English offset this in a way that was not apparent in attitudes towards written discussion. These low scores also highlight that the easy-hard pairing is one where students consistently tended towards the ‘hard’ end of the scale for the various concepts. The mean score of 2.70 across all concepts for easy was considerably lower than the overall mean (4.85) across all categories.

Discussion

Perhaps the most striking finding is the low score of 2.70 for the adjective ‘easy’ across all concepts compared to the positive attitudes shown in response to most other adjective pairings (average of all items = 4.85). Although it is perhaps questionable whether easy-hard should be viewed as a comparing a positive and negative attitude on the part of the student in the same way useful-useless or important-unimportant, for example, would. Combined with the positive responses when presented with other adjective pairings, the perception of learning English as relatively hard but otherwise more positive than any other concept measured, suggests that students might view it as worthwhile because they can achieve something that although difficult, they also view as nice (6.15), necessary (6.20), useful (6.20) and important (6.40). In the context of the earlier discussion of the degree to which language improvement is an implicit purpose of EMI courses, this provides evidence that, for these students at least, the importance of learning English is greater than either Britain (5.25) or the British Studies course (5.45). Of course, as the students in this class are studying in an EMI Global Communication program, the wider importance to their academic program of learning English is likely to strongly influence their attitudes in this regard, and it is questionable how far this finding can be generalized to students taking EMI classes where all or the majority of their program of academic study is not EMI.

Another finding with implications for the future of this class in particular is the relatively low general attitude score for the written topic discussions (33.2) compared with the spoken work in class (presentations = 37.55, discussions = 38.45). At the end of each week’s topic, students are asked to discuss, without reference to notes, what they know about the topic for that week’s class, recalling in ten minutes of writing as much as they can from the work in class and homework. This is assessed on their understanding of the subject matter not on their English proficiency and gives some ongoing feedback to the instructor about the students’ level of comprehension. In particular, the 2.1 mean score for ‘easy’ is striking. If students do perceive this activity in particular as hard, ways of giving support for this activity may need to be considered. One example of such support might be a semi-prepared sheet, with subheadings as prompts to help them structure their attempts to recall information on the subject matter from the class. It is also possible that the content of the First Year English Program (FEP) in the department influences the type of activity that students have had successful experiences with, and therefore are predisposed to view positively. Speaking in discussions and presentations both feature heavily in the Communication Skills strand of the FEP course taught by the same instructor (and

author of the present paper) as the British Studies course. The familiarity of these types of activity with this instructor may well help to explain the more positive attitude towards these tasks compared to the writing task, which is more dissimilar to activities used in the FEP Communication Skills classes.

As with Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2009) work on CLIL in Basque speaking regions of Spain, the positive attitude towards Learning English does not appear to be at the expense of a positive attitude towards the home country of the students. Japan had the second highest score on general attitudes and scored particularly highly in the nice-awful pairing (5.95).

A number of limitations in this study are worth discussing. There is no comparison group for either traditional EFL compared to CBI, or for British Studies subject matter taught through the medium of Japanese. The lack of a comparison group limits the conclusions that we can draw from this study regarding the degree to which positive student attitudes towards the British Studies EMI class allow us to favorably evaluate the implementation of an EMI British Studies course without knowing how positively students in these alternative settings view their classes. Furthermore, the small sample size, made up of predominantly first year female Japanese students who have chosen to study in an EMI undergraduate program, may well not be representative of students' attitudes more generally in Japan regarding EMI classes. The nature of the undergraduate program chosen by these students may indicate that there was already a positive attitude towards Learning English using an EMI approach. The data collection being carried out only once also limits the degree to which we can see the effect of the EMI British Studies course independently of students' longer term attitudes. To better capture the particular impact of this course, administering the questionnaire in the first week and the final week of classes might be more helpful.

Conclusion

The study investigated the attitudes of students' studying in an EMI British Studies course. Students were found to have a positive attitude to most class activities and to learning the English language, as well as to Britain as a country and the course overall. This did not come at the expense of their attitudes towards Japan, which they still viewed highly positively compared to most of the other concepts in the questionnaire. This class is taught as a content class, albeit with an awareness of the students' language needs, with language acquisition rather than subject content never explicitly being made a goal for learning. In this it is consistent with definitions of EMI rather than CLIL in the literature, or to the more content-based strands of a framework for understanding CBI classes. Nonetheless the students' responses provided support for the implicit goal of learning English being the most important aspect of this class for them. The small sample size and particular characteristics of this intact class made broader conclusions about content taught in English difficult to draw. Nonetheless, repeating this study using a pre- and post-questionnaire may offer opportunities to see the impact of EMI on students' attitudes.

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