

A Proposal for Lessons Incorporating CLIL Learning and Phonics through Picture Books in Foreign Language Activities Classes for Third- and Fourth-Grade Japanese Elementary School Students

Sanae FUJISAKI¹
Jennifer GREEN²
Keietsu GYOUBA³

Foreign language activities for 3rd and 4th grade students were introduced in Japanese elementary schools in the 2020 academic year. However, as suggested by the phenomenon often described as the "first-year junior high school English crisis," many students struggle to keep up with English classes once they enter junior high school. As one possible strategy for addressing this situation, the present discussion suggests that the systematic integration of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and phonics in elementary school English education may help mitigate the structural discontinuity that exists between elementary and junior high school curricula. Following the discussion, two instructional, picture-book activities are proposed that combine both CLIL-oriented practice and phonics instruction. By linking content learning with language development and providing explicit support for decoding skills and grammatical awareness, the proposed instructional approach may reduce learners' cognitive and affective burdens during the transition to secondary education. Admittedly, its effectiveness is influenced by contextual factors such as teachers' professional expertise and curricular constraints. Nevertheless instruction that incorporates a CLIL perspective and employs phonics as a supportive component represents a promising approach to enhancing both continuity and inclusiveness in elementary English education.

Keywords : CLIL, Phonics, Foreign language activities, Foreign language, Picture books, Lesson plan proposal

1. Introduction

Since 2020, Japanese 3rd and 4th grade elementary students have been studying English at school once a week, and 5th and 6th grade students twice a week based on the new guideline introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2017). The 3rd and 4th grade courses are called "Foreign Language Activities", *eigo katsudo* in Japanese, and the 5th and 6th graders' ones are called "Foreign Language", *gai kokugo*. Almost all schools in Japan have chosen to teach English as their foreign language option (MEXT, 2021). Foreign Language is a regular, graded subject, whereas Foreign Language Activities is not subject to formal evaluation.

MEXT has aimed to enhance systematic foreign language education throughout primary and secondary school. With the progress of globalization, foreign-language communication skills have come to be regarded

as abilities needed throughout one's lifetime (MEXT, 2017). In response to this demand, MEXT has added focus on strengthening basic language activities at the elementary level. In particular, the latest curriculum revision encourages students in grades 3 and 4 to become familiar with foreign languages primarily through "listening" and "speaking." In contrast, from grades 5 and 6, instruction develops into comprehensive and systematic learning that adds "reading" and "writing" according to students' developmental stages. The revision also emphasizes ensuring a smooth transition to junior high school.

However, as Fujisaki (2025) argues, English education in Japanese elementary schools currently faces a serious challenge known as the "first year junior high school English crisis." This problem stems from several inter-related factors, including a lack of curricular coherence, the prevalence of teachers without EFL-specific qualifications, insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher training, and inadequately designed textbooks. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to propose lessons that incorporate CLIL (Content and Language Integrated

1. 宮城学院女子大学教育学部教育学科児童専攻
2. 宮城学院女子大学学芸学部英文学科
3. 仙台市教育センター 若手教員支援室 主査

Learning), picture books, and phonics learning activities into the Foreign Language Activity classes for grade 3 and 4 students. Incorporating these activities at the lower elementary level may help mitigate some of the difficulties that arise during the later transition to higher-level English lessons.

This analysis begins by examining the current curriculum, learning outcomes, and textbooks used in English instruction for 3rd and 4th grade students. It then clarifies the concepts of CLIL and phonics-based activities. Next, it reviews prior research on CLIL implementation in both Australia and Japan. Finally, the study proposes alternative lesson plans that integrate CLIL and phonics approaches. In conclusion, this study argues that the proposed lesson plans are expected to alleviate students' burden in bridging the gap between English education at the elementary and junior high school levels.

2. The current curriculum, outcome and its textbooks

MEXT guidelines (2017) state that the 3rd and 4th grade Foreign Language Activity courses' objectives are to help learners become familiar with the sounds and rhythm of English. Therefore, the students are not required to practice reading and writing activities. Instead, they do activities such as listening to English sounds, chanting, singing songs, and learning straightforward greetings and basic conversations by repeating them so that they can “get used to” English sounds.

However, multiple studies including surveys of practicing elementary school teachers have documented a range of concerns related to the formalization of English as a subject and its earlier introduction in elementary education (Otsu, 2016). One study (Yonezaki et al., 2016) surveyed elementary school teachers to examine their perceptions of making English a formal subject and introducing it at lower grade levels. Their analysis revealed that teachers were particularly concerned about their own limited English proficiency and pedagogical

skills, the necessity of having subject-specialist instructors, and the potential increase in students' learning burden. With respect to professional competence in particular, many respondents expressed doubts, including concerns about inadequate English proficiency for teaching and uncertainty about how to design effective English lessons. These responses point to insufficient teacher confidence as a fundamental challenge in implementing elementary-level English education.

As anticipated by Erikawa in 2017, gaps in English proficiency have been widening. The issues outlined above are also reflected in international assessments of English proficiency. The English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), published in November 2024 by EF Education First, a Switzerland-based international education organization, placed Japan 92nd out of 116 countries—its lowest ranking to date (Kyodo News PR Wire, 2024). Within Asia, Japan ranked at the bottom lowest. However, of more concern is that Japan's overall position in the rankings has shown a consistent downward trend over time. Additionally, Japanese respondents aged 18–25 performed significantly worse than those aged 26 and over. This trend may be partly attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it may also suggest a generational decline in English proficiency (Japan Today, November 9, 2024). Furthermore, MEXT's decision to withdraw from participation in the 2025 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Terasawa, 2025) may constitute an additional cause for concern, as it could be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgement of declining English proficiency and a move away from transparent comparison with peer countries.

2.1 Current textbooks for 3rd and 4th grade elementary schools in Japan

The current 3rd grade textbook, *Let's Try! 1*, consists of nine units. Below are titles of each unit, with additional example phrases and sentences provided in brackets.

Kitayama (2020a) examined the vocabulary items and sentence patterns used in *Let's Try! 1* with the aim of

Table 1 *Units of Let's Try 1*

UNIT 1 Hello (I'm _____, See you.)	UNIT 2 How are you?	UNIT 3 How many? (Ten apples.)
UNIT 4 I like blue. (Do you like color?)	UNIT 5 What do you like? (What sports do you like?)	UNIT 6 ALPHABET (Capital letters. Here you are.)
UNIT 7 This is for you. (What do you want?)	UNIT 8 What's this? (Hint, please. It's a fruit.)	UNIT 9 Who are you? (Animal story with pictures. Are you a dog?)

compiling a systematic inventory of lexical items as well as a categorized list of fixed expressions and pattern-practice sentences. The analysis identifies a total of 215 words, numerals ranging from one to thirty, all 26 letters of the alphabet, 101 fixed phrases (or chunks), and 43 full sentences, together with 31 phrases designed for pattern practice.

Units 1–5 include the unit titles and the activity names: “Let’s Watch and Think”, “Let’s Chant” (with titles), “Let’s Listen”, “Activity”, “Let’s Sing” (with titles), and “Let’s Play”. Unit 6 focuses on the alphabet, specifically capital letters. Unit 7 covers greeting cards with the use of capital letters, such as Happy Birthday and Merry Christmas. The final unit (Unit 9), Who Are You?, resembles a picture book and introduces descriptive language (e.g., I see something white, black, long, etc.) and question forms such as, “Are you a …?” At the end of the book, there are eight thick sheets of paper designed to be cut out to make a total of 160 cards. These cards include numbers from 1 to 20 and word cards covering 30 foods, 10 colors, 7 sports, 28 shapes in various colors, 17 animals, one tree, 8 body parts, 8 adjectives, 26 capital letters, and 5 blank cards.

The current 4th grade textbook, *Let’s Try! 2*, also consists of nine units. Below are titles of each unit, with additional example phrases and sentences provided in brackets.

Kitayama (2020b) also analyzed the vocabulary items and sentence patterns in *Let’s Try! 2* to compile a comprehensive inventory of lexical items, along with a list of fixed expressions and sentences used for pattern practice. The analysis identified 342 words, numerals ranging from one to sixty, all 26 letters of the alphabet, 74 fixed phrases (or chunks), and 36 sentences together with 19 phrases designed for pattern practice.

2.2 The objectives of reading in Foreign Language Activities for grades 5 and 6

As of the 2017 MEXT guidelines, grades 5 and 6 students are required to learn to read and write English. The followings are the objectives of reading for 5th and 6th graders’ English classes in elementary schools:

1. To enable students to recognize letters written in print script and pronounce how they are read.
2. To enable students to understand the meanings of simple words and basic expressions with which they have become sufficiently familiar through listening (MEXT, 2017).

However, Shimizu (2025) has argued based on an analysis of elementary school foreign language textbooks that current reading-related tasks do not extend to activities that involve reading for meaning through inference (i.e., comprehension of content) but remain at the level of letter-based reading. In existing elementary school foreign language textbooks, reading instruction is largely limited to letter recognition, offering few opportunities for students to independently read language beyond the word level. By contrast, junior high school foreign language textbooks published in 2021 show a marked increase in the amount of English text. To support continuity and articulation between elementary and secondary education, it is thus essential to strengthen reading activities in the latter part of sixth-grade textbooks (Shimizu, 2021).

Furthermore, reading involves bottom-up processing: letters, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and texts, and top-down processing, in which reading is carried out based on background knowledge, prior knowledge, and inferential prediction (Grabe & Yamashita, 2022). Although the second reading objective in elementary school foreign language education appears to include both processes, top-down reading may not be sufficiently

Table 2 *Units of Let’s Try 2*

UNIT 1 Hello, world! (Hello. Good morning. I like strawberries. Goodbye. See you.)	UNIT 2 Let’s play cards. (How’s the weather? It’s sunny. Yes, let’s. Sorry. Stand up.)	UNIT 3 I like Mondays. (What day is it? It’s Monday. Do you like Mondays? Yes, I do. No, I don’t. I like Mondays.)
UNIT 4 What time is it? (It’s 8:30. It’s “Homework Time”. How about you?)	UNIT 5 Do you have a pen? (Yes, I do. No, I don’t. I have /don’t have a pen. This is for you.)	UNIT 6 Alphabet (lower letters. Look. What’s this? Hint, please. How many letters? I have six. Do you have a “b”? Yes, I do. No, I don’t. That’s right. Sorry. Try again.)
UNIT 7 What do you want? (I want potatoes, please. How many? Two, please. Here you are. Thank you.)	UNIT 8 This is my favorite place. (Go straight. Turn right/left. Stop. This is the music room. This is my favorite place. Why? I like music.)	UNIT 9 This is my day. (A routine story with pictures. I wake up at 6:00. I have breakfast at 7:00. I go to school. I go home.)

recognized. One major cause of the junior high school crisis in English classes may be based on the students' inability to read English sentences. Introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) activities at the elementary level may help to address this imbalance.

3. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

One potential approach to addressing some of these issues is the adoption of CLIL. Expanding classroom practices to include CLIL-based activities may help address practical challenges at the classroom level. In particular, CLIL activities can support comprehension and foster learner motivation, offering a promising pedagogical tool for instructors.

3.1 What is CLIL?

Coyle et al. (2010) define CLIL as an educational approach that focuses on both content learning and language learning, characterized by a dual focus on using a foreign language for instruction of content other than language learning. In other words, foreign language learning is not merely the goal; rather, the foreign language functions as a tool for the learning, enabling deeper understanding of subject content. CLIL refers to a pedagogical approach that gives equal weight to the learning of academic content and the development of language skills. The effectiveness of CLIL programs relies on deliberate course design and structured planning, with particular attention to the integration of Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, commonly known as the 4Cs framework. This paper investigates the role of each of these components and analyzes how their interaction influences the effectiveness of CLIL instruction, based on insights from prior research. The literature consistently demonstrates that all four elements are integral to successful CLIL implementation. While there is some divergence among scholars regarding the relative importance of individual Cs and whether certain components should be emphasized depending on learner characteristics or instructional aims, there is general consensus that the framework functions best when applied in an integrated manner, with flexible adjustments to meet contextual demands.

More broadly, CLIL combines subject learning with language learning by allowing learners to engage with

English through disciplines such as mathematics, science, social studies, and interdisciplinary subjects. This approach enables learners to experience learning through a foreign language rather than learning a foreign language solely for future use, a shift that is widely considered to support language development and increase learner motivation. (Hidalgo & Ortega-Sánchez, 2023).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an innovative pedagogical approach with considerable potential to enhance students' language development, subject understanding, and overall academic performance. By combining language instruction with disciplinary content, CLIL offers learners purposeful learning environments that support the development of communicative ability, higher-order thinking, and intercultural awareness. Scholarly discussions on CLIL have highlighted its capacity to reshape language education and to encourage multilingualism across a range of educational settings (Dzulkurnain et al, 2024).

Empirical research on CLIL indicates that learners engaged in CLIL programs often show gains in multiple aspects of language proficiency, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Moreover, CLIL supports more profound understanding and longer-term retention of subject content by situating learning in authentic contexts and fostering connections across disciplines. In many cases, students in CLIL settings achieve levels of content mastery that are comparable to, or exceed, those of peers in conventional subject-focused classrooms, underscoring CLIL's effectiveness in promoting academic achievement and critical thinking (Dzulkurnain et al, 2024).

At the same time, the successful implementation of CLIL depends on several interrelated conditions, such as the quality of teacher preparation, the degree of institutional backing, and the availability of appropriate resources. Teachers are pivotal to CLIL success and therefore require targeted training and sustained professional development to integrate language and content instruction effectively. Equally, strong institutional support and sufficient resources are necessary to create supportive learning environments and to respond to the varied needs of learners (Dzulkurnain et al, 2024).

3.2 The Four Cs of CLIL

The core principles that constitute CLIL are known as the "Four Cs": (1) Community, (2) Content, (3) Cogni-

tion, and (4) Communication. This framework was proposed by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) and has been extensively explained in Japan by Henmi et al. (2019) in their Report on CLIL Materials Development for Elementary, Junior High, and Senior High Schools. The four elements have no hierarchy; all are indispensable to effective CLIL implementation. In designing lessons, it is crucial to integrate the Four Cs in a balanced and coherent manner (Hemmi, 2019).

The four C's are as follows. *Community* refers to the learner's social environment such as friends, class, school, and local community, and it emphasizes collaborative learning within these contexts. Educators and materials developers design instruction based on socio-constructivist principles that address both content and language. Socio-constructivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and dialogue with others, and that learners develop new understanding through collaboration with teachers and peers. In line with this perspective, CLIL places *content* at the center of learning, where students acquire subject knowledge through the use of a foreign language. Authorized English textbooks address diverse themes such as social issues, nature, science, and history, and often make use of authentic materials. It is important to ensure that learners have sufficient opportunities to develop interest in and deepen their understanding of the content. *Cognition* concerns the development of thinking skills. When learners engage with new content, the emphasis is not merely on memorizing information but on forming questions, considering reasons, and developing their own viewpoints. Such learning processes contribute to the cultivation of deeper thinking skills, including critical thinking, a necessity in the 21st century. *Communication* is as important as content in CLIL. The language used in learning is considered in terms of language for learning, language of learning, and language learned through learning. CLIL places particular emphasis on awareness of the contexts and situations in which language is used (Hemmi, 2019).

3.3 Examples of CLIL

The following section introduces examples of CLIL practices implemented in Australian primary and secondary schools and Japanese elementary schools and examines their characteristics and challenges.

3.3.1 CLIL bilingualism is taught in Australian primary schools

Over the past ten years, CLIL has attracted increasing attention in Australia, largely in response to low enrollment and poor continuation rates in language education within mainstream schooling (Turner & Fielding, 2020). It is promoted as an approach for embedding languages such as Japanese and German within the core curriculum and for addressing persistent dropout in language programs (Ohki & Cross, 2024). Australian CLIL programs using English and Japanese are growing, mainly as innovative bilingual models within public schooling. Research suggests they can enhance motivation and oral language proficiency without necessarily harming content learning, but success depends heavily on context: teacher bilingual capacity, resources, school structures, and long-term pathways from primary to secondary (Harbon & Fielding, 2022).

Nawrot-Lis (2021) examined how CLIL influences both language development and subject-matter learning is reviewed. The survey is organized into five parts, with particular attention given to the impact of CLIL on learners' linguistic competence across the four core language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—as well as vocabulary and grammar. Overall, the literature suggests that CLIL tends to enhance general language proficiency; however, it also reports evidence that some specific linguistic domains, such as syntax and pragmatics, show little or no measurable change.

Evidence from meta-analyses and systematic reviews at the primary level indicates that CLIL generally results in moderate to substantial improvements in foreign language development, particularly in oral skills. Content learning is usually comparable to that of non-CLIL programs, although outcomes may differ depending on instructional design (De Diezmas, 2016).

3.3.2 Examples of CLIL lessons in Japan

The following section introduces two examples of CLIL practices implemented in elementary schools in Japan and examines their characteristics and challenges.

3.3.2.1 A CLIL lesson incorporating Japanese traditional culture and crafts

A CLIL initiative implemented in the fifth and sixth grades of a Japanese primary school centered on traditional crafts showed that students were able to employ the targeted English expressions while concentrating on

subject matter such as historical backgrounds and local industries. The program also reported high levels of learner engagement and the development of cross-cultural awareness (Ito, 2018). The CLIL lesson was implemented focusing on Nara uchiwa (traditional Nara fans) as the subject content with grade students at a public elementary school. The four-period unit integrated arts and crafts, social studies, moral education, English, and ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) to promote multidimensional learning. Following a preparatory lesson on safely using cutter knives, the CLIL lessons were conducted. They first introduced the history, uses, and contemporary challenges of Nara fans through slides and guided questions, with students responding mainly in Japanese while the teacher modeled English. Key expressions highlighting regional characteristics were repeatedly presented, and students examined actual fans and designed their own products.

The second CLIL lesson centered on fan production, with instructions delivered primarily in English, prompting students to attempt English questions using familiar vocabulary. A content-focused quiz at the end assessed understanding of historical and cultural aspects. Through hands-on production and English presentations of their work, students integrated content knowledge with language use, showing increased interest in Japanese culture and greater willingness to communicate in English. However, the study also identified challenges related to lesson preparation, time constraints, teachers' English proficiency, and inter-teacher collaboration, indicating the need for stronger collaborative frameworks and well-designed teaching materials to sustain effective CLIL implementation.

3.3.2.2 A CLIL lesson integrating elementary English education and disaster prevention education

Jona (2022) conducted a CLIL unit on disaster prevention in 2021 with second-grade students at a national university-affiliated elementary school to examine the feasibility of CLIL at the lower elementary level. The six-lesson unit was structured around a scenario in which students created a disaster-prevention song for international students from countries with little experience of earthquakes. Using a teacher-provided rhythmic song as a base, students rewrote the lyrics by incorporating English vocabulary related to disaster preparedness,

including *earthquake, typhoon, tsunami, thunder, and lightning*, and by freely combining simple expressions such as “How about an earthquake?” and action-oriented phrases like “go under” and “go up.” The lessons also incorporated card games and teacher-led storytelling, and students repeatedly practiced disaster-response actions while singing. The findings suggested that this multimodal approach enabled learners to become familiar with disaster-related English expressions in an engaging and enjoyable way. At the same time, the study noted that many lower-grade students had limited opportunities to interact with foreigners, which made it difficult for them to relate the lesson scenario to their own experiences, indicating a need to reconsider the suitability of the contextual setting for this age group.

3.3.2.3 Possibilities and challenges of CLIL in Japan identified through the Case Studies

The two studies above indicate that CLIL lessons in elementary schools in Japan have educational benefits, though with some practical challenges. First, the use of familiar topics such as traditional culture and disaster prevention heightened students' engagement with the learning content. This approach aligns with the 2017 MEXT guidelines (MEXT, 2017), which underscores the importance of cultivating regional awareness and appreciation of Japanese cultural heritage. As a result, students' willingness to articulate what they had learned in English was strengthened. In addition, the inclusion of experiential components, such as hands-on production tasks and singing activities, facilitated a natural integration of content comprehension and language use, thereby further enhancing learners' motivation. At the same time, several practical challenges became evident, including the burden of lesson preparation, difficulties in time allocation, teachers' expertise, and the need for collaboration across subject areas. In addition, for lower-grade students, the use of foreign language contexts was not always perceived as personally meaningful, making it difficult for the purpose of activities to be fully shared among learners. Despite these potential challenges, ultimately, both CLIL activities were overall successful and engaging as reported by the researchers in each study.

In light of this success, the present authors argue that CLIL and CLIL-oriented practices may offer one effective avenue for bridging the reading gap among Japanese learners by introducing phonics in grades 3 and 4 through

CLIL-based activities. Such instruction would help learners distinguish phonics-based decoding from the Roman alphabet reading and would support the development of basic independent reading skills, including the ability to read simple words and sentences on their own, typically a bottom-up process. However, integrated with CLIL and CLIL-oriented practices, reading practice would expand to include top-down processes where reading is related to the subject matter already being taught in schools and to general knowledge in life.

4. The definition of Phonics

Phonics refers to an instructional method for teaching reading that emphasizes the relationship between written symbols and their corresponding sounds in speech. Learners are guided to read by combining individual letter sounds, enabling them to decode new words and build essential early literacy abilities. In systematic phonics instruction, these sound-letter correspondences are presented in an explicit and carefully sequenced progression (Nims-Fournier, 2024; Ehri, 2020; Chen et al., 2024).

In our industrialized society, written words are a key part of people's lives. Learning to read these words is arguably the single most important skill that a child needs to learn. When a child can read, they have a lifetime of possibilities opened up to them (Sullivan, 2024. p1).

In English-speaking countries, phonics instruction is typically introduced in the early years of primary education, particularly in Grades 1 and 2. During a school visit conducted by Fujisaki in 2025 to the Gold Coast, Australia, it was observed that the core lesson plans for both Grade 1 and Grade 2 English classes consistently emphasized phonics instruction alongside shared reading of picture books and simple writing activities. This observation indicates that even native-speaking children, who already possess oral proficiency in English, receive systematic phonics instruction as part of formal schooling. From this perspective, it appears unrealistic to expect Japanese learners to develop the ability to read junior high school English textbooks without explicit phonics instruction at the elementary level.

At the same time, phonics instruction includes a number of irregular spelling-sound correspondences, and excessive emphasis on such irregularities may lead to learner confusion (Kanamori, 2024). Therefore, at the

elementary school level, it is pedagogically important to prioritize foundational phonics rules and provide ample opportunities for repetition and consolidation, rather than introducing overly complex or exceptional rules prematurely.

5. Reframing Phonics Research in EFL Contexts

The role of phonics within EFL and CLIL contexts must also be considered. Rather than assessing phonics through a simplistic dichotomy of effectiveness versus ineffectiveness, it adopts a more nuanced perspective. Although a growing body of research suggests that phonics instruction can be beneficial in EFL settings, such effectiveness is highly conditional and context dependent (Woore, 2022). Accordingly, this study article reviews phonics research conducted in EFL environments, synthesizing both its reported benefits and documented limitations, and situates phonics within broader discussions of EFL literacy development (Ren & C., 2017).

Research supporting the effectiveness of phonics in EFL contexts indicates that phonics instruction contributes to improved word recognition and decoding accuracy, particularly among learners with limited phonological awareness and limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Huo & Wang, 2017). Studies conducted in Japanese and other East Asian EFL contexts further suggest that phonics instruction may interact with learners' prior literacy experiences, including romaji, and may help reduce reliance on Katakana-based phonological representations (Allen-Tamai, 2000; Saito, 2011). In addition, EFL-focused studies report short-term and localized benefits of phonics instruction, such as gains in early vocabulary reading and improved understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, particularly in the early stages of literacy development (Li, 2021).

At the same time, critical perspectives within EFL research have highlighted several limitations of phonics instruction. One recurring concern is the limited quantity and quality of input available to EFL learners, which constrains the extent to which phonics instruction alone can lead to stable reading development (Liang & Fryer, 2024). Another concern is the risk that phonics instruction may become insufficiently meaning-oriented, particularly when decoding practice is detached from communicative or comprehension-based activities (Silverman et al., 2020). Research on EFL reading processes

has shown that successful comprehension relies on the interaction of lower-level decoding skills and higher-level meaning construction, rather than on decoding in isolation (García & Cain, 2014). EFL scholars have also cautioned that phonics-first approaches may create tensions with communicative language teaching if phonics is treated as a prerequisite rather than as an integrated component of instruction (Huo & Wang, 2017).

This study analysis focuses on its reinterpretation of phonics from a CLIL perspective within EFL education. Within this framework, phonics is positioned as a subordinate skill within Communication, one of the four components of the 4Cs framework (Coyle et al., 2010), and decoding is conceptualized as scaffolding that supports comprehension of academic content in a second language (Lee et al., 2022). In this regard, although Snow et al. (1989) focus on immersion education rather than EFL, their work provides a foundational theoretical rationale for content-language integration and is therefore relevant to CLIL-oriented EFL contexts. Their argument that language development is most effectively supported through meaningful content engagement underpins the present study's approach to integrating phonics with subject learning.

In contrast to conventional phonics research that treats phonics as an isolated foundational skill, this study integrates phonics instruction with CLIL. Through this integration, phonics is reframed not as “sounds for reading,” but as sound-letter correspondences that support comprehension of content-specific language and concepts, aligning with EFL research that emphasizes literacy development as a meaning-driven process (Yan et al., 2020). From this perspective, CLIL-oriented phonics instruction can partially compensate for limited input by increasing opportunities for repeated and meaningful exposure through content learning. In doing so, it functions as a bridge between form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction in EFL classrooms. In response to longstanding critiques of phonics, this study therefore argues that phonics should not be regarded as an end in itself, but rather as a mediational tool embedded within CLIL-based EFL instruction.

6. Proposed lesson plans

As explained in Section 2.2, Japanese students need increased opportunities to practice reading sentences in

response to the substantial expansion in the volume of English found in junior high school textbooks. Therefore, strengthening reading activities is essential to ensure continuity and coherence between elementary and secondary education. Based on the four Cs of CLIL, to implement CLIL lessons effectively, it is essential to select themes and design activities that are appropriate to students' developmental stages. In this section, two lesson plans for elementary school Foreign Language Activities classes incorporating CLIL principles and phonics activities are developed, exploring the potential of lessons that aim to foster students' thinking through English and promote active, self-directed learning.

Both lessons utilize picture books as the focal point of the lesson. Lessons focusing on picture books were chosen for their appropriateness in relation to the students' developmental stage. These lessons using English picture books in Grades 3 and 4 are better described not as “CLIL itself” but as an “entry point to CLIL,” or “CLIL-oriented practice.” Soft CLIL refers to foreign language instruction in which elements of subject matter, such as science, history, or vocational themes, are integrated to provide a meaningful context for language use. In this approach, linguistic objectives take precedence, and content is simplified and carefully selected to align with learners' proficiency levels and learning needs (Sohnet et al., 2022).

When content, cognition, and language are integrated, such lessons can be considered a form of primary-level CLIL. For Japanese elementary school students in Grades 3 and 4, such practices are highly meaningful as a stage for becoming familiar with the sounds and rhythms of English, acting as a stepping stone towards CLIL activities. Lessons using English picture books may be considered as CLIL-oriented practice if they meet the following conditions:

1) Content is clearly defined.

Through the picture book, learning objectives beyond language are established, such as themes from life studies or moral education (e.g., coexistence, empathy, diversity).

2) Cognition (thinking activities) is incorporated.

Rather than simple comprehension checks, the lesson is designed to foster thinking skills such as comparing (same/different), classifying (living/non-living), reasoning about cause and effect (because), and predicting out-

comes (What will happen next?).

3) Language functions as a tool for learning.

English is used not only as the object of learning for content comprehension but also as a means to express ideas (e.g., in combination with drawings, gestures, and previously learned expressions).

6.1 Using *See How It Grows*

In the third grade, students study topics such as the growth and body structure of insects and the growth and body structure of plants. They cultivate plants such as loofah gourds and observe the life cycle of butterflies. *See How It Grows* is a picture book written by Kimberlee Graves that shows illustrations of various plants and creatures growing, accompanied by sentences such as, “See how the tree grows,” “See how the butterfly grows,” and “See how people grow.” A series of lesson plans spanning several weeks is presented here, incorporating the concept of growth through both a picture book and a hands-on vegetable-growing activity. Across these two activities, phonics instruction focusing on the letter “s” is also introduced. The series of lesson plans is as follows:

Week 0: Preparation and reading

In Japanese, tell students you are going to learn how things grow. Read the book *See How It Grows* to the class. Draw a strawberry, spinach, banana, broccoli, and green peas on the board (alternately you can project pictures or use picture cards). Have the students chant the words as you point to them. In Japanese, ask the students where they think new fruits and vegetables come from. After a student mentions seeds (if not, volunteer the idea yourself), write the word “seed” on the board and draw a picture of a seed.

Draw an s-shape stem sprouting from the seed and say “See how the seed grows?” Write the sentence on the board. Ask the students if they see a similar shape in the letters as the sprout. Point out the letter “s”. Read the sentence again, following the sounds of the letters while you read with your finger. Ask the students to talk with their classmates nearby and guess what sound the letter makes. If necessary, add emphasis to the /s/ sound while reading again to help the students pick out the sound.

Ask them to talk with nearby classmates to see if they remember any of the names for the fruits and vegetables you drew. Then ask for a volunteer to answer some of them. If they answer in Japanese, say they are correct,

repeating back the word in English. Say the English word for each of them and ask them which words have an /s/ sound. Write the words for each below the respective pictures. Underline the “s” in “spinach,” in “strawberry,” and in “green peas.” Have the students chant the words that contain the /s/ sound while you follow the sounds of the letters with your finger.

Have the students practice drawing the letter “s” several times, then decorate the letters as flowers with leaves and petals.

Tell the students that they will make their own vegetables grow next week. Tell them they will need to bring various fruit or vegetable seeds from home.

Week 1: Guessing game and planting seeds

Read *See How It Grows* to the students. Write the sentence “See how the seed grows” on the board. Tell students to bring out the seeds that they brought from home. Students show the seeds they brought from home and guess what plants each seed comes from. Students may guess in Japanese, and the teacher will recast their guesses using English words, writing the words on the board. The teacher writes the student guesses on the board.

Prepare seeds from fast-growing vegetables such as mizuna, lettuce, and cherry radishes. Have students plant the seeds in small pots and write a tag with their name for the plant that they planted. Have students draw the pot with the soil, seeds, the tag, the water, and sunlight. Have the students label the following on their drawing in English: “pot,” “saucer,” “soil,” “seeds,” “tag,” “water,” and “sunlight.” Have the students underline the words that have an /s/ sound and chant those words.

Week 2: Leaf growth

Read the book *See How It Grows* to the students. Then tell the students they will see how their seeds grow. Have the students draw the pot again with its new sprouts. Have the students label the drawing again, this time with the addition of the word “stem” and “leaf.” Have the students underline the words that have an /s/ sound and chant those words.

Week 3: Stem growth

Read the book *See How It Grows* to the students. Then tell the students they will see how their seeds grow. Have the students draw the pot again with its new growth. Have the students label the drawing again. Have the students measure the stem of their plant. Have them

write in English, “The stem is ___cm tall,” next to the stem on their drawing. Have the students underline the words that have an /s/ sound and chant those words.

Week 4: Stem growth continued

Repeat activities from week 3. In addition to writing, “The stem is ___cm tall,” have the students also write, “It is taller than last week.” Have the students underline the words that have an /s/ sound and chant those words.

Week 5: Stem growth continued

Repeat activities from week 4.

Week 6: Making a vegetable salad

Cut the vegetables and wash them to eat as a salad. Have students draw the salad they ate and write the word “salad.”

Optional at-home activities

- Record a video of the ALT reading the book for the students to watch at home.
- Have students read *See How It Grows* at home. Give stickers for students that report reading the book at home.

6.2 Using *Can We Be Friends?*

The picture book *Can We Be Friends?* by Fumie Maejima shows the story of a cat and a turtle that want to be friends. Through the book, the characters ask about various abilities each of them possess and whether the other can also do said ability using question sentences such as, “Can you hide your head?” and responses such as, “No, I can’t. But I can jump on the shed.” There is also an activity book that accompanies the main picture book. The following lesson plan incorporates phonics for the letter “t” into the activities provided by the activity book. This lesson plan is considered as a CLIL-aligned practice according to the guidelines explained above. The lesson plan is as follows:

Lesson introduction

Show the students the picture book and explain that you will be reading it together today. Ask if they know the animals on the page. Ask if they know the animal names in English. If no students know the animal names, tell the animal names.

Vocabulary introduction

Show the students pages 4–5 of the activity book and follow the activities on the page.

Book Reading Aloud

Read *Can We Be Friends* out loud to the students. If in a large classroom with many students, projecting the

book on a screen is recommended.

“t” phonics introduction

Do the TT dance by the TTBrothers (also known as Chocolate Platinum). Tell the students that your body shape is a “t”. Read the vocabulary from pages 4–5 of the activity book and ask students to listen for the words with a /t/ sound. Do the TT dance again. Say that your body is the shape of “t”. Write the letter “t” on the board. Ask the students to circle the letter “t” that they see on the vocabulary page as you read the words. Finally, chant the words that have the “t” sound.

Note: The word “cat” should also be included in this activity.

Recognizing words with the /t/ sound

Using page 6 of the activity book, have students put stickers only for words that use “t” (“turtle”, “cat”, and “tree”).

Verb phrases

Follow the activities on page 7 of the activity book. After finishing the activities, have students do the TT dance followed by students touching their toes.

Tracing words

Follow the activities on page 8 and 9 of the activity book. Ask students where “t” is on each page.

Word associations

Follow the activity on pages 10–11. Have students point out the words that use “t” and chant those words.

*** Activity book page 12 may be skipped dependent on lesson length.*

Maze activity

Follow the activity on page 13. Explain that the letter “t” can be in the beginning, middle, or end of a word using the words “turtle” and “cat” as examples.

Grouping words

Follow the activity on pages 14–15.

Focusing on ability

Follow the activity on page 16.

Coloring with “t”

Ask the students to color the pictures of words that use “t” (“tree”, “turtle”, and “cat”).

*** Activity book pages 18–20 may be skipped dependent on lesson length.*

Role-playing

Follow the activity on page 21. Play an altered version of the game Simon Says with the students. Students will gesture if you include the word “can” in the sentence,

but will not if the word “can’t” is used. (Ex. The teacher says, “I can swim,” and the students should gesture swimming. The teacher says, “I can’t touch my toes,” and the students that gesture touching their toes are out.)

** *Activity book pages 21–22 may be skipped dependent on lesson length and on class size.*

7. Conclusion

In sum, this paper argues that a systematic integration of CLIL and phonics into elementary school English instruction has the potential to address structural discontinuities between elementary and junior high school curricula. By aligning content learning with language development and providing explicit support for decoding and grammatical awareness, the proposed lesson plans may ease learners' cognitive and affective burdens during the transition to secondary education. While the effectiveness of such approaches is influenced by contextual factors such as teacher expertise and curricular constraints, it is suggested that CLIL-informed, phonics-supported instruction offers a promising direction for improving continuity and inclusivity in early English education.

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