

## Using Literature and Creative Writing in Japanese Language Instruction for Beginner-Intermediate Learners: Towards a CLIL Syllabus

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**Abstract:** Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has been drawing a lot of support in recent years, not only from language acquisition and education theorists, but also from language instructors, especially in the field of ESL. However, examples of CLIL in Japanese language instruction are still scarce, and especially so in the case of beginner/beginner-intermediate learners. Drawing from studies on the benefits of CLIL and my own observations in class, this paper proposes a Literature and Creative Writing syllabus for beginner-intermediate level Japanese language learners and discusses some of the main benefits of such an approach.

**Keywords:** Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), creative writing, Japanese contemporary literature, Japanese language teaching, beginner-intermediate level

A Japanese language learner myself, I still remember to this day the dread I used to feel as a beginner-intermediate student whenever I had to tackle a slightly more complex text (and by complex, I mean any meaning-carrying text outside the ones in the textbook). By far the most frustrating and frequent reading experience I had was when I could identify all the words in those long lines of kana and kanji, but somehow the meaning of the text itself blatantly eluded me. Years passed before I could engage with a text solely for the purpose of retrieving information and even many more before I could engage with a literary text for the simple pleasure of reading.

Since April 2016, I have been teaching Japanese Reading and Composition at Toyo University in Tokyo, and now, as a language instructor, one of my main concerns is to somehow smoothen out this particular road for my students – by getting them to approach Japanese language not as a goal in itself, scary, static and at times unattainable, but as a flexible and easy-to-use instrument, through which they can identify and create meaning, share their ideas, communicate and ultimately grow as individuals. This was the primary reason why I have set upon developing a CLIL syllabus for the beginner-intermediate level Reading and Composition class, and why I have finally decided on Japanese Contemporary Literature and Creative Writing as its subject.

### ***Why Literature and Creative Writing? And why CLIL?***

Two of the main reasons why I decided on Japanese contemporary literature and creative writing as a subject for my syllabus are, on the one hand, the overall structure of the Japanese language training program at Toyo University (NEST, *Nihongo for Exchange Students*) and my students' motivation to learn the language, on the other.

The NEST program is an intensive Japanese language-training program for international exchange students who do not have N2 (JLPT) at the moment they are admitted into one of Toyo University's departments. Toyo presently has 83 partner universities in 27 countries and students' specializations come as diverse as they can be, from Letters (including Japanese language and literature) to Sociology, Law or

Business Administration. Students who have passed N2 at the time of admission are only required to attend classes in their specialization during their stay at Toyo University (ranging from 6 months to one year), whereas for those who have not yet passed N2, the NEST program is mandatory (consisting of roughly two language classes a day, four days a week). As a result, the mix of students taking the beginner-intermediate Japanese language classes at Toyo University is quite heterogeneous, both in terms of background and motivation. As a general trend so far, students (originally) specializing in Japanese language or culture do tend to be more focused on learning the language and adapt easily to the classes' content (exhibiting a stronger intrinsic motivation), but the largest part of beginner-intermediate classes is made up of students with a lot more diverse Japanese-learning backgrounds (varying from optional, slow-paced classes to individual study), whose motivation leans more towards their own specialization than an intensive, mandatory Japanese language-learning program.

### *Program overview*

As per the online description, NEST's main goal is "for students to be able to gather, convey and discuss information about recent events and social issues and about their academic disciplines in Japanese, as well as being able to use academic vocabulary specific to their fields". Moreover, aiming at offering students a comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture, it offers exchange students lodging in a mixed dorm (exchange students/Japanese students), access to homestay programs, cultural exchange circles, and cultural activities (both traditional and contemporary) ranging from museum visits to guided field trips through Tokyo's most popular areas.

Although NEST's core language classes have a somewhat more traditional structure (Integrated Japanese, Kanji, Listening Comprehension, Reading and Composition), the program's instructors routinely engage students in activities that aim at developing their critical and creative thinking (especially the Japanese culture and Project Work classes) and the program's management itself is very flexible in terms of instruction methodology.

Therefore, when creating the syllabus for the Japanese Reading and Composition class, I wanted to use the program's flexibility to my advantage and focus on a topic relatable for all categories of students, while at the same time providing them with a set of essential reading and writing skills and more generally applicable learning skills (like cooperative learning). As I believe literature is, on one hand, an essential element in understanding and engaging with a culture and, on the other hand, one of the most pleasurable and meaningful ways of engaging with a text, I finally decided on the present topic (Contemporary literature and creative writing).

While in Japanese language education circles literature seems to be tacitly dismissed as not really level-appropriate for beginner-intermediate classes (I do know, for example, many intensive Japanese language programs that offer an array of culture/history-related courses for beginner-level students, but I do not know of many to include literature), it is my firm belief that contemporary Japanese literature offers a large variety of level-appropriate content and a creative approach to it would benefit students immensely both in terms of creativity and engagement with the "Japanese experience", as well as language practice.

### ***Theoretical grounds for CLIL use in Japanese language instruction***

In "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition" (1982), Stephen Krashen put forward his theory of second language acquisition, stressing the importance of comprehensible input and meaningful interaction in the target language (the Input Hypothesis), and also differentiating between acquisition and learning as two distinct and independent ways of developing linguistic competence in a second language. Whereas he defines "acquisition" as an essentially unconscious, natural process, very similar to the way a child learns their first language, he uses "learning" to refer to explicit learning, to the *conscious* knowledge of a second language (the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis). Although both these ways of acquiring language are coexistent in adults, he points to a very specific role for each of them: whereas acquisition is responsible for fluency and for initiating utterances in the second language, learning has only a limited function - that of a monitor (or editor), which alters the output of the acquired knowledge, ensuring grammatical accuracy (the Monitor Hypothesis). In this context, he was one of the earliest theorists to discuss the benefits of content and language integration in language instruction, as language learning would occur naturally, unconsciously, while focusing on content.

The bulk of Japanese language education still focuses to this day on what Krashen calls *conscious* learning, but it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a lot to gain in terms of student motivation and overall language acquisition efficiency if Japanese language programs opted for more flexibility and also included content-based instruction (CBI) into their approach. The benefits of CBI are manifold, and have gained extensive support since the 1980s. For a more comprehensive view on its benefits, I referred to Grabe and Stoller's *Content-based instruction: research foundations* (1997), which draws on studies from a variety of fields – ranging from SLA and training studies to educational and cognitive psychology and empirical research – to point out the overwhelmingly positive effects of adopting a CLIL model in language instruction. Here, I will only mention a few results that are specifically relevant to the task at hand – developing the Literature and Creative Writing syllabus for the beginner-intermediate level Reading and Composition class – mainly the benefits in terms of student motivation, language acquisition efficiency and development of more widely applicable learning (and social) skills.

Based on much of the previous research Grabe and Stoller (1997) summarize in their paper, CBI does seem to allow for the ideal conditions for language learning to take place: for one, it is – for all intents and purposes – a student-centered approach which involves students in appropriately challenging tasks, allowing them to gain recognizable expertise, building their confidence and leading to increasingly deep intrinsic motivation. Gaining expertise and recognizing it makes students more eager to learn and challenge themselves further, encourages them to access their own prior knowledge to learn additional language and content material and eventually turns them into more efficient and self-motivated learners. Moreover, by presenting students with coherent and meaningful information (like thematically organized material, in this case – literary texts) and engaging them in self-generated elaborations (such as adding additional phrases to a sentence, continuing a text, forming "why" questions about the text etc.) leads to better recollection, deeper processing and eventually better learning. Additionally, as the authors note, "CBI approaches provide one of the few realistic options for promoting the development of strategic learners within a language-learning curriculum. The content component of a content-based classroom provides the extended coherent material into which

strategy instruction can be integrated and recycled on a daily basis” (Grabe and Stoller, 1997:11-12). From the point of view of more widely applicable learning (and social) skills, CBI also offers more options in terms of cooperative learning, encouraging peer group support or peer instruction.

The applicability of CBI seems all the more relevant for me at the moment, in the context previously discussed, i.e. having to teach beginner-intermediate classes which are largely heterogeneous in terms of motivation and academic background, while also staying within the structure and requirements of Toyo University’s Japanese language instruction program. In my opinion, employing a CBI model focusing on Japanese contemporary literature and creative writing would help students overcome their fear of tackling more complex texts, which is essential to their learning progress and also help them develop intrinsic motivation. By deciphering the literary text and engaging creatively with it, the students make the text “their own” and no longer engage with it on a purely linguistic/formal level, but they learn to use their target-language solely as a tool, while also (hopefully) picking up an interest for contemporary Japanese literature.

### **Syllabus overview**

The course’s main focus is Japanese contemporary literature and creative writing. Unlike more traditional literature classes, however, the present course does not focus on a critical or historical approach to literature, but instead aims at encouraging creative thinking and active involvement with the text. Furthermore, rather than working with more established and widely known contemporary texts, which are broadly available in translation and broadly discussed, the focus will be on recently published (and less available) texts, so as to always have a feel of the contemporary literary scene in Japan. Among my favorite candidates are some of the latest winners of Japan’s most prestigious literary awards, like the 2016 Akutagawa Prize winner Sayaka Murata’s コンビニ人間 (*Convenience store people*).

From the language instruction perspective, the class encourages students to engage with more complex and meaningful texts from an early stage in their language learning process, so that they learn to approach Japanese language with more ease, not as a rigid and often frightening set of never-ending rules, but as a readily accessible tool that facilitates their communication and creative expression. By focusing on creative writing activities and cooperative learning activities, the students will develop basic text writing skills ranging from sentence to paragraph and even text composition, text-editing skills (reviewing their peers’ texts, exchanging detailed revision suggestions, developing revision plans and rewriting the texts), while at the same time developing more generally useful skills in the academic field (such as peer review, peer instruction or peer group support). Additionally, the students will be able to acquire vocabulary and grammar relevant to their topic, and can do so at their own pace, depending on their level of language proficiency and motivation.

As far as the texts to be used, I have opted so far for prose (novel fragments or short-short fiction), as it is accessible to a broader category of students and also offers some advantages from the point of view of language learning for beginner-intermediate level students. Unlike poetry, prose can be more easily adapted for comprehensiveness and also allows for more text-writing skills acquisition. Some of the texts I have used so far (as isolated modules), or have taken into consideration for this syllabus, are Genki Kawamura’s 世界から猫が消えたなら *If Cats Disappeared from the World*, Sayaka Murata’s コンビニ人間 *Convenience-store*

people and Hoshi Shinichi's 肩の上の秘書 *The Assistant on the Shoulder* etc.

Taking into consideration the language program's overall goal – to help students acquire basic-to-intermediate syntactic competence (from complex sentence level to paragraph and text level), while facilitating active learning strategies (with focus on brainstorming, collaborative learning and creative thinking), I have split the syllabus into three modules and a final project over the course of a semester (15 weeks in total), each extending over 3 to 4 weeks. The modules are designed so as to facilitate the introduction of increasingly complex composition tasks (starting with sentence-level and short-paragraph-level activities in the first module and gradually moving towards longer paragraphs – Module 2 – and eventually texts, in Module 3 and the final project).

#### *Tentative semester break-up*

Week 1: Introduction (Semester overview, text selection etc.).

Week 2-4: Module 1 – novel fragment 1 (*If Cats Disappeared from the World*)

Week 5-7: Module 2 – novel fragment 2 (*Convenience Store People*)

Week 8-10: Module 3 – short-short story (*The Assistant on the Shoulder*)

Week 11-14: Final project – free creative writing topic; to roughly follow the same structure as the previous modules: writing – peer review – rewriting plan – rewriting – presentation and self/peer evaluation

Week 15 – General feedback by the instructor, discussion, magazine creation

#### *Main activities and module flow*

To incorporate the aforementioned course goals, I have devised the following type of activities, to be loosely used in the same sequence throughout the modules (I have had variations in these activities both times I have experimented with one of the modules, depending on each class's necessities and student reaction, but the basic elements I have kept unchanged):

1. Reading comprehension activity (Group activity: reading the text while referring to the attached vocabulary list and answer a few questions/make up questions about the text)
2. Pre-writing group activity (Group discussion: character or context building)
3. Creative writing activity 1 (paragraph-level, based on the original text)
4. Peer feedback activity (Group work: students read the other group members' texts and provide feedback, focusing on originality, style, comprehensibility, paragraph structure, basic grammar/vocabulary)
5. Reflection activity (Based on the peers' observations and suggestions, the students fill in a Reflection sheet, devising a plan for the text's revision)
6. Writing activity 2 (Rewriting activity, based on the established plan)
7. Optionally, an independent writing activity, which allows students to get creative and encourages individual, independent research (Creating a new story, based on specific, isolated elements of the main literary text).

Although I have not yet tested all the modules proposed in the present syllabus in a class environment, I have finally decided on the above structure based on my observations during the previous two semesters, after using the below module with two different classes. The module is based on Genki Kawamura's 世界から猫が消えたなら (*If Cats Disappeared from the World*).

- Week 1 of 3: Reading and group activities (3-4 students)/ Writing activity (see

Annex, Activity sheets 1~3)

- Week 2 of 3: Peer feedback and reflection sheet/ Rewriting plan and, optionally, writing activity (see Annex, Activity sheets 4~5)
- Week 3 of 3: Text submission and creative writing/ Independent writing activity based on a single element from the original story/ Peer feedback / Reflection sheet (following previous activity models)

Just before introducing this module to the class (which had followed a more traditional language instruction method until then), I had asked my students to name one object that they used daily (or that was essential to their life) and I made a note of it (words such as *bed*, *phone*, *refrigerator*, *myself*, *Toyo University* appeared). Then, as we finished all the text-based activities, I used the objects they had previously named as a prompt for their final story (the independent writing). They had no other requirement than to write something entitled *If [their daily object] Disappeared from the World*, and the results were impressive. Some students brought back essays (What if Clothes/Refrigerators etc. Disappeared from the World), but the large majority submitted or presented stories in very unique formats. For example, one student wrote her story in the form of a hand-made fairytale book (a sad story about how her friends and family would live in a world where she has disappeared from), another in the form of a Murakami-esque email dialogue with one of his teachers (going to school one day, he no longer finds the building, so he reaches out to his teacher, who, nightmarishly, does not even know who he is). Yet another student wrote a science-fiction story as a framed narrative. She even went to the extent of creating extra props, like a testament to serve as a frame story to her main narrative – and a *kamishibai* that served as the latter (Figure 1 - A fascicle of Emma's *kamishibai* story).

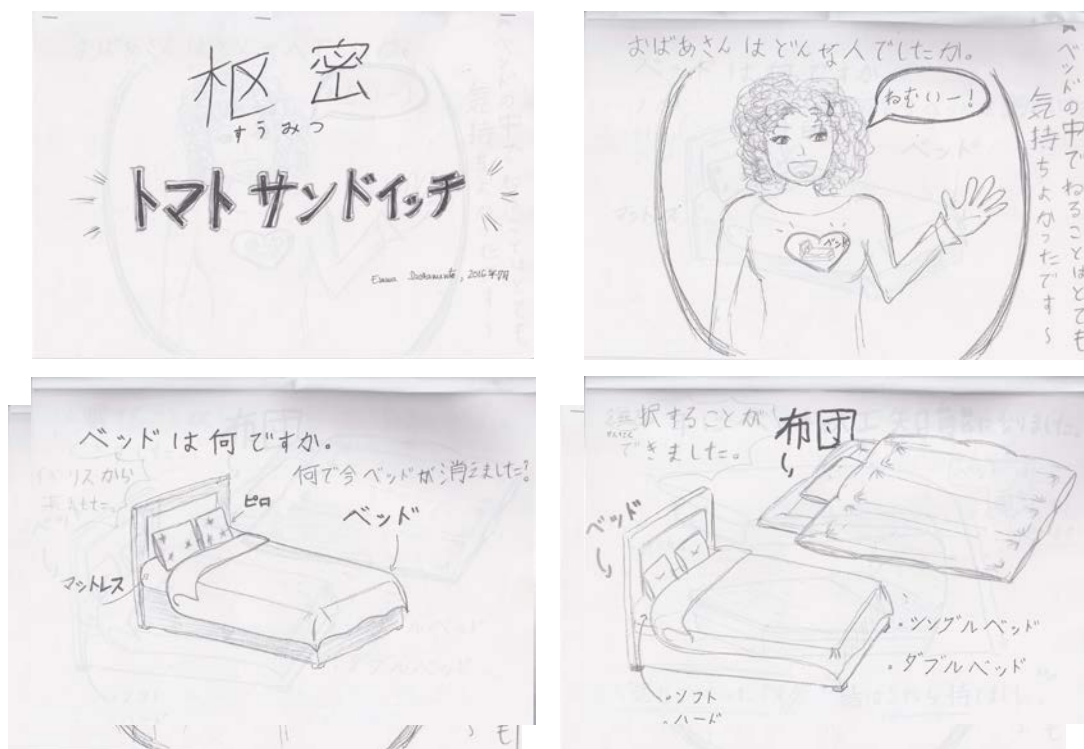


Figure 1-4. A fascicle of Emma's *kamishibai* story  
The students' reaction to the module and their dedication to the tasks

pleasantly surprised me. Most of the text formats had not been previously approached during class, and the majority of the students had done independent research to find the appropriate vocabulary and formal elements for the narrative styles they picked.

By focusing on the *content* – engaging with the original text, making it “their own” and expressing their own creative ideas – students not only acquired the necessary linguistic knowledge and skills, but, more importantly, they also *created* their own knowledge and understanding, and did so at their own pace and in their own style.

Although before introducing the aforementioned content-based module in the Reading and Composition class I had my doubts about its applicability in a beginner-intermediate context, the students’ level of involvement and quality of work (both times I used it) convinced me of the possibilities it could offer. The most valuable lesson I have taken from introducing this module was the extent to which my students challenged themselves in order to convincingly express their own creative vision. Most of the students went above and beyond class requirements in terms of both content creation and presentation, and their motivation stemmed less from extrinsic factors such as grades and evaluations, and more from a desire to create and express themselves. This is, I believe, one of the essential benefits content and language integrated instruction can bring to the table, and Japanese language education can take ample advantage of it across the board, from beginner to advanced-level.

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## **Class resources**

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## Annex – Activity sheets

### I. Activity sheet 1 – Reading activity

#### Read the following text:

せかい ねこ  
世界から、もし猫がとつぜんきえたら。  
このせかいはどうかわり、<sup>ぼく</sup> 僕の<sup>じんせい</sup> 人生はどうか<sup>か</sup> 変わるのだろうか。  
せかい ぼく き せかい か  
世界から、もし僕がとつぜん消えたら。この世界は何も変わらないで、いつも  
おなじ むか  
と 同じような明日を迎えるのだろうか。  
くだらないアイデアだ、とあなたは思うかもしれない。でも<sup>しん</sup> 信じてほしい。  
これから書くことは僕に起きたこの一週間のできごとだ。  
とてもふしぎな一週間だった。

とつぜん unexpectedly かわる to change 人生 (one's) life ぼく 僕I, me (明日を) むかえる to approach (a point in one's life, a specific time)	くだらない silly, worthless しんじる to believe できごと event/occurrence ふしぎな unusual, mysterious
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### Activity sheet 2 – Pre-writing activity

#### The character's profile

名前：

ねんれい：

見た目：

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

家族：

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

ホビー／好きなこと：

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

嫌なこと：

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その他：

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[ ]さんの1日について書いてください：

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### Activity sheet 3 – Writing activity

#### Read the rest of the text and write the continuation:

世界(せかい)から、もしねこがとつぜんきえたら。このせかいはどうかわり、  
僕の人生はどうかわるのだろうか。せかいから、もし僕がとつぜんきえたら。  
このせかいは何もかわらないで、いつもと同じような明日をむかえるのだろうか。

くだらないアイデアだ、とあなたは思うかもしれない。でもしんじてほしい。  
これから書くことはぼくに起きたこの一週間のできごとだ。とてもふしぎな一週間だった。

そして間もなく、僕は死にます。なぜこうなったのか。その理由(りゆう)について、  
これから書こうと思う。きっと長い手紙になるだろう。でも最後まで付き合(つあ)って  
ほしい。

そしてこれは、僕(ぼく)があなた(あなた)に送(おく)る最初(さいしょ)で最後(さいご)の手紙(てがみ)になります。そう、これは  
僕の遺書(いしょ)なのです。

(川村元氣「世界(せかい)から猫が消えたなら」より)

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II. Activity sheet 4 – Peer review activity  
Feedback sheet

**Read your colleague's text and give them feedback, focusing on the following:**

1. Three things (or more) you found original/interesting

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2. Three things (or more) you think need improvement

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3. Other comments/questions for your colleague

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Activity sheet 5  
Reflection sheet/ Rewriting plan

**Based on the comments you received from your colleague and on your own thoughts, reflect on your text while focusing on the following:**

1. Three (or more) good things about your text

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