

USING THEMATIC UNITS TO TEACH EFL IN A VENEZUELAN CONTEXT

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Educators who teach English in Venezuela are faced with many challenges. For example, in the Secondary School Curriculum, English is taught as an academic subject only three hours a week. Although the English syllabus provided by the Ministry of Education is communicatively and functionally based, many teachers still use the techniques suggested by the Audiolingual Approach such as choral repetition, oral drilling, and dialogue memorization. Still, other teachers who learned through the Grammar Translation Method, carry on the tradition of using this method, paying little attention to recent theory and practice.

Other problems besides outdated traditions plague the EFL teacher in Venezuela where there is very little access to people using English in their work or daily lives. Since there are very few opportunities for contacts in English outside the classroom, it is necessary for the teacher and classroom activities to be sources for meaningful English input. However, I believe that, despite the problems of the limited contact time and the limited environment, it is possible for young students to become motivated learners of English.

In this paper, I will share experiences of Venezuelan student teachers in their practicum assignment. Using thematic units which emphasized content instead of traditional grammar or the notional functional based curriculum, these student

teachers helped their students not only use English successfully in the classroom, but also saw their students become enthusiastic English language learners.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING IN THE USE OF THEMATIC UNITS TO TEACH ENGLISH

Since the use of theme-based instruction has been increasingly replacing grammatical or notional-functional syllabi in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, the question of how to train teachers to implement this form of instruction becomes critical. The main purpose of theme-based instruction is

to differentiate the more traditional language-based instruction, that is, the study of language itself as subject matter (with its parts of speech and verb tenses and sentence structures) from language instruction that uses content as a vehicle for achieving language mastery (Master, 1992 :p.75).

Master (1992) believes that the use of themes is the codification of a practice that many ESL/EFL teachers have come to spontaneously and independently. He states that even in the most traditional grammatical syllabus, it is impossible for the teacher to spend the whole class period teaching grammar. For this reason, reading and writing are viewed as

the most logical alternatives, and using several texts dealing with the same theme or topic is preferable to reading and writing on many different topics. Through themes, topic-specific vocabulary is recycled as second language students learn both language and content.

HOW DID THE STUDENT TEACHERS USE THEMATIC UNITS ?

Student teachers at the University of the Andes take two semesters to get their certificate to be English teachers. In the first semester, they take the English as a Second Language Methods course and in the second semester, they have their practicum experience in local secondary schools. In the Methods course, I lay out the theory of language learning and expose the students to different methods of teaching a second language. Once students understand how language is learned, they can better evaluate different methods. In the last five years, I have presented whole language principles (Freeman & Freeman, 1992) to be applied in the EFL context. Through readings and demonstrations, the students come to understand how language taught through content and themes is both authentic and meaningful to learners of English.

Shortly before the beginning of the practicum semester, I received a phone call from the principal of one of the most prestigious secondary schools in our community. He was very concerned about the English classes at his school because students disliked the classes so much that they tried to skip them, refused to do their homework, and even caused

discipline problems. I offered to have all sixteen of my student teachers work in his school if he would assure me that those teachers would be allowed to implement a new approach to teaching English. He readily agreed saying that this was exactly what he wanted.

One of the first things I looked at with the practicum teachers was how to present and organize their themes. According to Gamberg, et al, (1988), in order for a theme to qualify as deserving of study, it must be of interest to the students, it must be broad enough so that it can be divided into smaller subtopics of interest to them, and it should lend itself to the comparison and contrast of ideas allowing for investigation of concrete situations, materials and resources. Peck (1992) also indicates that in theme-based instruction it is very important to

include clear, appealing content that is relevant to students and clarified through several means : pictures, objects, books, films, visiting speakers, field trips, writing activities and so forth. (p.134)

Keeping all these criteria in mind, student teachers first brainstormed with their students in order to identify the areas of interest of their classes and to make the final decisions in the selection of a theme relevant and interesting to each group. The following themes were pointed out by the students :

Food
Holidays
Actors/Singers/songs
Animals

Sea Animals
Family
Advertisements
Drugs
Story books
Cooking/Recipes

Although, at first glance, these themes with the exception of drugs, story books, and sea animals, seem quite traditional for language learning, it is not surprising that the students chose them because of their expectations of what vocabulary is traditionally taught in second language classrooms. Obviously, what the student teachers actually did with their students was very different from what they had experienced in the past.

A SAMPLE UNIT AT ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL

The drug unit used by one of the student teachers turned out to be one of the most successful experiences for both student teachers and English learners. Using Howard's Wonderfilled Way of Learning (Freeman & Freeman, 1992), the student teachers first found out what the students already knew about drugs and what they wanted to know (see figure 1). Then they discussed ways to find out about drugs. The students decided to collect information from different magazines and to invite a guest speaker from the university to speak to the class.

Figure 1.

A Wonderfilled Way of Learning
Don Howard, Tucson, Az
(in Freeman & Freeman, 1992)

Step 1 : What do we know about ?

- Choose a topic. Use students' questions.
- Teachers and students work together to find out the resources they count on.
- Teachers and students work together to discover what they already know about the topic. (brainstorming, the teacher asks students to list things they know)
- Questions can be collected over several days

Step 2 : What do we wonder about.. ?

- Once reviewed what students know about the topic, they start listing their wonders. Wonders can be collected over several days.

Step 3 : How can we find out about... ?

- The teacher works with the students to see how they can find out the things they want to know (books, magazines, encyclopedias, films, guest speaker)
- Students start taking responsibility for finding authentic answers.

Step 4 : The action plan

- The teacher and the students work out an action plan
- Objectives of the district syllabus can be included into the action plan

Step 5 : Celebration of learning

- Big Books, plays, films, parents' conference, parties, songs, poetry, bulleting boards, etc.
- Guest speaker.

Step 6 : New wonders which serve as the basis for the beginning of a new cycle.

- Explore new questions

The students read and discussed the materials they had found and listened with interest as the university professor told them about the dangers of using drugs. What happened next was not only very exciting but almost unheard of in this school. The students decided that what they had learned was so important that they wanted to share it with the entire student body. They invited the university expert to come to speak to the whole school. The students made and put up posters in English advertising both what they had learned and the upcoming assembly.

Through this unit the students did much more than learn the vocabulary related to drugs. They also learned important content and shared that content with other students and teachers. This unit and the others taught were so successful that at the end of the practicum, the secondary students begged the student teachers to stay for the rest of the year. Although this was not possible, the principal hired four of the teachers to teach permanently and has asked to have student teachers placed at his school site again.

CONCLUSIONS

Theme-based instruction requires an understanding of learning theory and teacher training in curriculum and materials development. It also means a lot of work for the teacher, particularly in regard to the inquiry of students' needs and interests. It is critical that the selection of themes be based on these needs and interests of those studying the foreign language. This experience of using themes with secondary students in Venezuela proved effective in providing

opportunities for learning and using a second language purposefully. For the first time, English was valued and students enthusiastically practiced English using it in this authentic and meaningful way.

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