

# Theme based approach in a freshman education essay



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In the last decades several approaches to teach English in EFL contexts have appeared and disappeared as research in this area has developed. Since the 1980s, when constructivism appeared “ with its emphasis on social interaction and the discovery, or construction, of meaning “(Brown, 2007, p. 12), several methods have come up claiming to be the best to incorporate the basic elements of this theory and to be the solution for English teachers to make all their students learn and have fun with the target language. As Brown (2007) explains many of these methods are considered representatives of what is nowadays known as the Communicative Language Approach, which is “ an eclectic blend of the contributions of previous methods into the best of what a teacher can provide in authentic uses of the second language in a classroom”. (Brown, 2007, p. 18)

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of applying one of these ‘ so called’ communicative approaches, the Theme-Based Approach, in the context of a freshman university course of English as a foreign Language. Though the author of these paragraphs believes that there is no such thing as the ‘ perfect method’, and that it is a good teacher’s job to choose the pedagogical techniques that best suit her learners’ needs and her beliefs about language teaching, she will only evaluate the benefits and handicaps of using the strategies proposed by this single approach in her own teaching context.

Yang (2009) explains that the theme-based instruction is usually considered within the model of content-based instruction. (p. 162) As the name suggests, the curriculum of this approach is organized around themes or topics which contextualize the elements of the target language that are

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presented to learners. Many of these themes can be derived from the subject matter contents that the students are learning in the different stages of their education.

Shin (2007) states that “ When teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at any level, the classroom has to be a place in which language is not only taught but also used meaningfully”. (p. 2) Curtain and Dahlberg in their book *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (2010) assert that as “ the teacher connects language instruction to existing themes or creates language-specific themes, the language class is clearly an integrated part of the school day, and languages are perceived to be meaningful components of student learning”. (p. 1-2)

Brinton (cited in Shin, 2007) claims that a thematic curriculum can provide “ rich input for lessons that are either language-based (i. e., with a focus on vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar) or skills-based (i. e., with a focus on listening, speaking, writing, or reading).” (p. 2)

Gao (2011) describes the theme-based approach as relying on Krashen’s language acquisition theory which states that learners have to be presented with sufficient comprehensible input. This input has to reflect his idea of  $i + 1$ , where ‘  $i$  ’ is the learners’ current language competence and ‘  $+ 1$  ’ is the “ input supposed to be the slightly higher level than students’ faculty”.(p. 34) The teacher would be responsible of providing this input and of helping students to transform this input into intake. To do this, he or she has to select the theme and the activities related that would best suit the interests and needs of the students. Yang (2009) adds that when choosing the theme

and planning the activities, the “ children’s proficiency level” should also be considered. (p. 170) As in any communicative syllabus, in the theme-based approach, the learner is the protagonist of the process, so it is unthinkable to organize a syllabus without considering the learners’ interests and needs as a starting point.

In the following paragraphs the teaching context will be presented together with the different aspects of the theme-based approach that are believed to be applicable to this context.

Nowadays most schools are increasing the number of hours of English in their curriculums. Hence they are requiring teachers with a high command in the four skills of the language. Most schools are incorporating English in more than one subject matter. The Escuela de Educación of Universidad de los Andes took this need into consideration when planning the new curriculum and included 5 semesters of compulsory English courses. The general objectives of the English curriculum are “ to enhance the four language skills through reading, discussing and working with a selection of texts that aid in a better understanding of human beings and teaching” (English II, 2012). Students are divided in two proficiency levels which allow the students to feel relaxed as well as demanded in a level that fits their proficiency.

Nunan (cited in Yang 2009) claims that language is best acquired when the learners are organized in homogeneous levels of proficiency. The theme-based approach allows the teachers to adapt the themes, materials and

activities to the students' proficiency level, which is consistent with the organization of students in this context.

Since the class described here is a freshmen lower-level English class, the students, who are to become elementary teachers, are expected to produce short conversations on various topics using grammatically correct, formal and informal language, and a good command of the English sound system. They have to demonstrate critical thinking and knowledge of the specific topic and related vocabulary. They also have to be able to identify the main and secondary ideas in a short text (English II, 2012). These objectives refer to cognitive process as well as language command. The language is an instrument to develop thinking skills.

A Theme-based syllabus seems very suitable to allow all these objectives to be achieved. The English language can be learnt using the broad topic of Education, and within this, a myriad of themes ranging from elementary levels subject matters, to learning and teaching theories, or cultural knowledge of the English speaking countries. " When themes are well chosen, students will be more engaged with the learning because they can see its purpose and find it interesting -and fun". (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 2) In other words, this approach motivates students to learn languages. Gao (2011) mentions the experiment carried out in The Jiang University that supports this statement. Freeman & Freeman (cited in Yang, 2009) confirm this idea when they express that students are more willing to participate in the class, try harder, and stay concentrated, when the " content of the lesson is relevant and interesting" to them . " Their motivation is more likely to increase". (p. 162) In the case of the context analyzed in this paper, <https://assignbuster.com/theme-based-approach-in-a-freshman-education-essay-essay-samples/>

around one third of the students take it very seriously and understand the importance of learning English for their future career; one third are average students, who want to learn, but do not do any extra work and, one third who take it just as part of the curriculum. This is very pitiful if it is considered that intrinsic motivation is most important in the process of learning. The majority of the class does not have it in a desirable degree. The theme-based approach can be a major contribution to this issue.

Another interesting possibility allowed by this approach is the use of authentic materials. The teacher can select authentic readings such as poems, rhymes, short stories, newspaper articles, academic papers, among others, that present the learners with new vocabulary used in real situations in relation to the chosen theme. Apart from developing the skill of reading, these readings can be the starting point to students' production in English. " Ideally, the kinds of activities teachers design for the materials should move from comprehension activities to such production activities as making presentations to the class, or writing reports, creating a class anthology of stories, or even publishing a newspaper". (Strong, 1995) Hence, the four language skills can be promoted. Also, vocabulary related to the selected themes is more easily learned, as Khayef and Khoshnevis (2012) proved in their study carried out in Iran.

Themes also allow students to demonstrate critical thinking and knowledge of the specific topic and related vocabulary. Curtain and Dahlberg assert that activities in a theme- based approach can engage students " in complex thinking and more sophisticated use of language" (p. 4) Discussion around topics of interest to the learners can lead them to the development of

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complex ideas that involve the use of complex cognitive skills, such as analyzing, synthesizing, contrasting, comparing and others. These skills are desirable for our students, not only for their own benefit, but for their future students', too.

Students in the context described know that there are high expectations of them and that any help required will be available. This makes them feel motivated to put their best effort in using the target language and participating in the collaborative activities. “ The students in a theme-based classroom accomplish a diversity of communicative tasks in cooperative groups in which they share a common goal working productively” (Gao, 2011, p. 37) The disciplined environment that exists in this context would favor this kind of work.

Some of the techniques used in class are choral reading, grammar exercises in a context, oral presentations of different topics, cloze, dialogues, reflection, debate and discussion. The idea is to help learners use the language more spontaneously. It is important to consider the different learning styles of the students as it is done in this course, and to choose techniques that develop fluency and accuracy as well. Most, if not all, of these techniques can be easily adopted in the theme-based approach, but most importantly, it facilitates the development of accuracy by integrating the teaching of grammatical elements of the language in a meaningful context. “ Thematic instruction avoids the use of isolated exercises with grammatical structures, practiced out of context” (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 4). This view is totally consistent with the way grammar is presented in the context dealt with in this paper, although there is a risk of not giving <https://assignbuster.com/theme-based-approach-in-a-freshman-education-essay-essay-samples/>

enough consideration and depth to the syntactic elements of the language. As future teachers, these learners may need a more profound knowledge of the structures that configure the English language, so that they are able to solve the potential doubts of their future students.

Fluency also plays an important role in this approach for it promotes instances of oral communication. Gao (2011) confirmed in his study “ that the students under the guidance of Theme-based Oral Approach (TOA) are more likely to improve their oral English abilities and more enthusiastic and interested in oral English learning...”. (p. 37) Talking about topics and themes of common interest, such as the ones related to the students professional field or to the Anglo speaking culture, facilitates the interaction and negotiation of meaning that are described as part of the goals of the course and that underlie the kind of activities that the Theme-based approach advocates.

It is important to remember that these learners are future teachers, so the context is different from the typical language course. They are supposed to be models to other students in the future, either in the use of the target language as in her attitudes. This implies an extra variable playing in this second language learning environment that can also be assumed by this approach. The teacher is responsible of selecting the topics and adapting them to the different levels of proficiency and thinking skills of his or her students. Students in this course may adapt all the activities they are learning English with to the contexts in which they will be teaching in the future. Even though a theme-based syllabus reestablishes the importance of the role of teachers in the learning process, it gives them a great

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responsibility in the success or failure of this process, as well. Yang (2009) asserts that " theme-based teaching as an approach will not automatically make learners become more interested in learning English, unless teachers are able to use interesting activities and suitable materials". Selecting the right themes, materials, activities and organizing the students' work in the right way is what boosts learning. This can also be said about most approaches. Perhaps one of the main factors for any methodology to be fruitful is the way in which the teacher uses it in a specific context. The theme-based approach requires that the teacher invest a considerable amount of time in planning the lesson. Teachers can easily feel overwhelmed with the pressure of determining the goals, selecting the theme, creating the activities and materials, assessing the outcomes and all the other features involved in lesson planning. All this planning can be very time-consuming, being time one of the most precious and elusive treasures in a teacher's life.

All in all, I believe that the advantages for using the theme-based approach in the context described exceed by far the disadvantages. This methodology can help teachers motivate students to learn English as a foreign language, promoting its use in meaningful situations that encourage students to develop the four skills, listening, reading, writing and speaking, as well as important thinking skills. The costs or disadvantages affect mainly the teacher who is the one responsible for planning the lesson. I believe that the time invested in doing so thoroughly will pay back with high interests. The verification of students' learning is the best reward any teacher can have. As for the grammar knowledge issue mentioned as important in this context, I think that teachers can resort to other kinds of activities to provide extra

opportunities to exercise this element, even if it doesn't fit perfectly well in the theme- based approach.

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