

How Can Thematic ESL Units Be Used In the Elementary Classroom?

SABRINA PECK

California State University, Northridge

Many California elementary school teachers have the difficult task of juggling different language groups and ESL levels in their classrooms. This article will show how thematic ESL units can be an ideal way to interest and motivate diverse children and can give them varied opportunities to use language. When planning thematic units for classes made up of ESL children or ESL students integrated with native speakers of English, teachers need to give special consideration to choosing suitable themes and language arts methods. I will concentrate on unit planning by presenting example activities and discussing special methodological considerations for classrooms of diverse students.

Thematic (or theme-based or content-based) units in the elementary school are not new. There have always been good teachers who realize the value of tying together language arts, social studies, music, art—and perhaps science and math—in a unit about the ancient Greeks or the founding of the California missions. In 1976 Moffett and Wagner wrote,

A classroom has to be a cornucopia of opportunities so that no matter which way he looks a student can see interesting connections among things, words, ideas, and people. ... The main thing is to keep practicing language with involved care. So saturating the learner with language reinforces the strategy of going for volume and variety.

A group fascinated by animals can track them for weeks with great interest across folk tales, fables, true memoirs, poems, ... articles, statistics, charts and graphs and maps, photos, animal card games, films, and so on. At the same time they can interweave play-acting of animals, observing and note taking, journals, keeping pets, telling and writing animal

stories and fables, photographing and drawing and captioning, discussing arithmetical calculation, rehearsed reading of animal stories, and so on. (p. 41)

Today the language experience (Dixon & Nessel, 1983) and whole language (Goodman, 1986) approaches can be guiding principles for thematic units. In the activities which follow, we will see how thematic units have the same benefits for ESL learners as for native speakers of English.

Instruction through thematic units should 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. Language is used in several fields and across several modalities, all related to the same interesting theme. In other words, thematic units are likely to include comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) or sheltered English (Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992; Sasser & Winningham, 1991) and to teach ESL through the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Thematic units, also called content-based teaching units (Irujo, 1990), teach language along with content, thus producing "a sum greater than its parts" (Graham & Beardsley, 1986).

To plan a unit, most teachers start out by thinking of a theme that interests their students. Some examples are dinosaurs, food, apples, vehicles in the city, earthworms, Asia, Peter Rabbit, the five senses, and immigration. Sometimes a book or movie is the stimulus that leads to the theme; sometimes a teacher comes up with a theme as a result of conversations with students or by looking at their journals, free writing, or free drawing. The teacher needs to be enthusiastic about the theme herself and skilled at projecting this enthusiasm to draw in some of the less interested students.

Once the theme is settled on, the teacher can gather related resources that are already in the classroom (basals, trade books, art materials, etc.) and other resources from stores, businesses, the zoo, museums, libraries, and so forth. The teacher may then consider how students will be grouped during the thematic units. For whole class activities, the teacher will need to use sheltered English, including visuals and things to touch and do. For instance, Flynn (1991), in a unit on Peter Rabbit, had the children discuss the similarities and differences of a Peter Rabbit stuffed animal and a real rabbit. In Gibson's (1991) unit, "How We Travel in the City," a visitor gave a demonstration on bicycle repair and maintenance.

For activities that are focused on accuracy, students can work in equal-proficiency groups. For example, in "How We Travel in the City," the advanced ESL children and the native English-speakers worked on research projects together. One project was about Metro Rail (public transportation) in Los Angeles. In a second grade unit on rabbits (Crice, 1991) the children first listened to Beatrix Potter's

(1989) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and then broke up into three equal-proficiency groups. In the first group, the advanced ESL children and native speakers of English created sentences using assigned vocabulary. The intermediate children retold the story with the teacher and used sentence strips (for details about sentence strip activities, see Dixon & Nessel, 1983). The beginning group retold the story using a flannel board and discussed pictures for some of the vocabulary.

Mixed-proficiency groups are ideal for fluency-based activities (Bell, 1988). In a kindergarten and first grade unit (Frankel-Winkler, 1991) mixed groups of children visited learning centers together and talked about their experiences. For example, at one center the children tasted sugar and salt, as well as other items that looked the same. In a third grade unit on cooking, Allen (1991) had mixed groups of third graders make collages and choose one child to report on the collage to the whole class.

Along with considering ways of grouping the children, the teacher needs to incorporate a variety of the newer language arts approaches—whole language, the language experience approach and process writing—into the unit. Rich's (1990) fourth grade unit on apples illustrates a whole language approach. She planned two hours per day for three whole language activities: a *theme experience*, a *literature activity*, and *interpretive activities* (terms from Heald-Taylor, 1989). One day, in the theme experience, (or, hands-on experience with the theme of the unit) the children made applesauce. In the literature activity, the children did a choral reading about Johnny Appleseed. They then divided into equal-proficiency groups for interpretive activities. The advanced group compared two versions of the Johnny Appleseed story. The intermediate group completed sentences relating to the story, and the beginning group dictated their own stories about Johnny Appleseed. (For a more detailed discussion of whole language teaching as it relates to content-based instruction, see Freeman & Freeman, this volume.)

The language experience approach, actually one component of the whole language approach, can also be used profitably in ESL thematic units. For instance, in a first grade unit on farm animals, the students might follow this sequence: (a) Listen to a story about cows, while sitting in a circle; (b) take a turn shaking a jar of heavy cream as it comes around the circle; (c) discuss dairy products; (d) spread butter from the jar on crackers; and (e) write a group story about the experience.

Through process writing, children have many chances to write about an aspect of the theme and revise. In Wenger's (1991) unit on animals, children follow these steps: (a) Choose an animal to write about for the class newspaper, (b) write the name of the animal, (c) borrow books about the animal, (d) visit the zoo, (e) receive background information from the teacher about animals, and (f) write

about what interests them most about their animal. Of course, cycles of peer editing, revising, and finally publication follow quite naturally.

Another way to check or monitor a thematic ESL unit as it is planned is to make sure that all four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—are represented in the activities. Let's illustrate this with Ryan's (1991) unit about the farm. The children listen (they see a film, "A Visit to the Farm"), speak (mixed-proficiency groups view farm animal cards, choose a favorite, and present to the class), read (they practice their lines for a play, "The Little Red Hen"), and write (they compose a group story about the play).

An additional check is to make sure that content, along with language arts activities, is an integral part of the unit. In a third grade unit on animals, Wheeler (1990) integrated science (a lesson on animal environments and food chains), social studies (mapping a country and its animals), music (the song, "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly"), and art (paper bag hand puppets of animals).

To sum up, I have made several major points here to help teachers in planning thematic ESL units:

1. In general, adjust the language to the learners (use sheltered English) while adding more things to see, touch, and do.

2. Plan mixed-proficiency group activities. These will supply relevant input for low-level ESL children and will challenge the native English-speakers and high-level ESL children to rephrase their language and tailor it appropriately.

3. Plan equal-ability groups for accuracy-based activities.

4. Check that all four language skills are part of the activities and that some aspects of the whole language, language experience, and process-writing approaches are being used.

5. Check that variety of content material has been incorporated.

The units cited here (all developed by classroom teachers) are intended to supply inspiration more than models. Such inspiration can be helpful because the work involved in designing thematic units is considerable; the units, of course, can be used over and over again. Teachers might also move beyond the approaches here: by planning a unit along with their students (Irujo, 1990) and by choosing themes in light of curriculum frameworks (Gianelli, 1991). The benefits of thematic units will repay teachers for their efforts. In essence, thematic units give teachers flexibility in lesson planning. They lend themselves to high-interest, motivating lessons in which children learn and use English in a variety of ways, while mastering content at the same time. ■

References

- Allen, Elyse. (1991). *Cooking*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Bell, Jill. (1988). *Teaching multilevel classes in ESL*. San Diego, CA: Dormac.
- Crice, Chris. (1991). *Rabbits*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Dixon, Carol N., & Nessel, Denise. (1983). *Language experience approach to reading (and writing)*. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press.
- Edwards, H. P., Wesche, M., Krashen, S., Clement, R., & Kruidenier, B. (1984). Second language acquisition through subject matter learning: A study of sheltered psychology classes at the university of Ottawa. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41(2), 268-282.
- Flynn, Kim. (1991). *Peter Rabbit*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Frankel-Winkler, Eva. (1991). *The Five Senses*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Gianelli, Marge C. (1991). Thematic units: Creating an environment for learning. *TESOL Journal* 1, 13-15.
- Gibson, Karen. (1991). *How people travel in the city*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Goodman, Ken. (1986). *What's whole in whole language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graham, Janet G., & Beardsley, Robert, S. (1986). English for specific purposes: Content, language and communication in a pharmacy course model. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 227-45.
- Heald-Taylor, Gail. (1989). *Whole language strategies for ESL students*. San Diego, CA: Dormac.
- Irujo, Suzanne. (1990, March). *How to plan content-based teaching units for ESL*. Paper presented at the meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, San Francisco. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 320 452).
- Krashen, Stephen D. (1981) Bilingual education and second language acquisition theory. In California State Department of Education, *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 51-79). Los Angeles: California State University, Los Angeles, Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center.

- Krashen, Stephen D., & Terrell, Tracy D. (1983). *The natural approach*. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press.
- Moffett, James, & Wagner, Betty-Jane. (1976). *Student-centered language arts and reading, K-13*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Potter, B. (1989). *The tale of Peter Rabbit*. New York: Penguin.
- Rich, Kay. (1990). *Apples*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Richard-Amato, P., & Snow, M. A. (1992). Strategies for content-area teachers. In P. Richard-Amato & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *The multicultural classroom: Readings for content-area teachers* (pp. 145-163). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Ryan, Kathleen. (1991). *Farm animals*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Sasser, L., & Winningham, B. (1991). Sheltered instruction across the disciplines: Successful teachers at work. In F. Peitzman & G. Gadda (Eds.), *With different eyes: Insights into teaching language minority students across the disciplines* (pp. 27-54). Los Angeles: California Academic Partnership Program.
- Wenger, Gemma. (1991). *Animals*. Unpublished thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.
- Wheeler, Joffie. (1990). *Animals*. Unpublished two-week ESL thematic unit. California State University, Northridge, Elementary Education 570.