

Let's make Language Learning a Meaningful Experience: Theme Based Teaching for Fourth
Graders

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Abstract

Theme-based teaching was proven to be very useful for fostering meaningful language learning because this approach provides the opportunity to balance content and language. Meaningful language experiences emerge when students begin to express their interests using their previous knowledge and connect the class content with their lives. Three data collection techniques were used not only to answer the research question, but to achieve the objectives of this project. A journal to describe each given lesson. An interview to the Cooperating teacher and a survey to students. This study concluded that theme-based teaching makes language learning experience meaningful when students' needs and interest are considered as the foundations upon which lesson planning should depart.

Key words: theme-based teaching, meaningful language learning experience.

Preface

The actions of this research project were implemented in a fourth-grade class at I. E. Miraflores Luis Eduardo Valencia. It was challenging to put into action the theoretical foundations I learnt in the school of languages at the University of Antioquia. I decided to focus my project on the use of themes because I wanted to explore an alternative way to teach the language different than just memorize lists of words. I was interested in fostering the learning of the language through the use of themes and activities that make possible a connection between language and students' lives experiences.

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Description of the context

The educational institution where I carried out my teaching practicum was a coeducational and public school located in Buenos Aires neighborhood. The student population came from nearby neighborhoods that belonged to social stratum 1 and 2. Most of them were displacement victims of Colombian violence. The school had an estimated population that consisted of 1.300 students from preschoolers to eleventh graders and whose ages ranged from 4 to 19 years old.

I.E Miraflores was created by Municipal Agreement on April 6th, 1995. Nevertheless, its origin goes back on May, 1936, when the property was obtained by the religious community ‘‘El sagrado Corazón’’. A group of nuns that wanted the school to be a monastery and a private school for young girls. It was open until 1994. In 1997 the institution was given the name Miraflores-Luis Eduardo Valencia Garcia, in honor to the teacher and civic leader of the city.

It was a three-story building with a castle like façade that reflected the architecture of a city just emerging. The courtyard where students not only spent their recess time, but also played basketball, volleyball and soccer, was located across the main school entrance. The school was equipped with three computer rooms, a photocopy center, a psychology’s room, a huge art classroom and an auditorium for school special events such as the weekly principal speech or the academic coordinator’s announcements.

The observation was carried out in a third-grade class which consisted of 10 girls and 21 boys whose ages ranged from 8 to 10 years old. Students were pretty active, most of them like playful activities and others preferred to draw. They were always willing to learn English, interested in increasing their vocabulary. They used to ask for the meaning of new words and the

translation of words from Spanish into English. There were four students who came from shelter houses where they received psychological assistance.

My cooperating teacher holds an undergraduate degree in Special Education and another in environmental management. She has been a teacher for 23 years. She was appointed to teach the content of English and Artistic courses. She used to believe that language was taught by memorizing lists of words and translation method organized around themes and grammar. The purpose of the English class is not only that the students use in a correct way of English languages, but also they feel interest on it.

Statement of the problem

I went to observe this class for about a month before I could actually teach a real class. During this observation time, I had the opportunity to see that students' interest towards the English class was little. The class methodology was focused on having kids memorize list of words and copy nonsense sentences on their notebooks. I could realize that the content of the class was not really connected to their lives. I had the chance to witness that students were not learning to use the language for real purposes. Furthermore, they did not feel encouraged to learn English because of the lack of opportunities to interact with meaningful resources that support their learning of the language.

As a matter of fact, my cooperating teacher (CT) usually gave instructions and some other things using mostly Spanish. *“the teacher began to explain in Spanish the activity that students had to do. She gave them a word search in which they had to complete. They had to find the*

vocabulary worked in class'' (Journal 6. August 30th, 2016). On the other hand, the teacher did not use any material to explain other activities, she always used the board in which students had to copy everything on it. *''The teacher wrote on the board a list of numbers: 24- 27- 35- 39 – 40- 42- 48- 50- 53- 59- 60- 61- 66- 70-74-77 in which students had to rewrite them and under each one how to write them in English. Next, she gave them an example: 13/thirteen''* (Journal 1, July 26th, 217).

Therefore, these aspects refrain students from having a meaningful learning experience because they did not have any direct contact with the language; they were just learning isolated words and translating phrases in Spanish with no sense for their lives (Journal 5, August 23rd, 2016) *she wrote some time expression with their meaning in Spanish: Today- hoy -This week- esta semana, now- ahora and at this moment- en ese momento''*

In fact, all the activities were around the translation of sentences. (Journal 5. August 23rd, 2016) *''(...) the teacher wrote the use of time expressions in a sentence with its meaning in Spanish: Today I will play football- Hoy jugaré futbol. After that, she asked the students to write five sentences using the time expressions and the verbs written on the board making their translation in Spanish''*. Moreover, isolation of a topic with another *'' When the students had completed the translation of the five sentences. They had to do another activity in which they had to search differences of two image that she was going to give them (Journal 5, August 23rd, 2017)*

All of these issues called my attention, especially the lack of languages exposure, teacher's scold, the lack of teaching materials and the lack of planning. However, since I started teaching them, my focus of attention was addressed to some other issues such as strategies I

could use to foster interest toward English language. Then, this information helped me to find activities that were closer to their daily life, taking in to account their needs and interests.

I thought that this class needed more time to plan the topics, even the activities worked in class. Besides, finding appropriate teaching materials related to the issues and appealing to students' interests. Content was adapted according to their ages and considering concepts close to their lives.

Observing these problems, I realized that what I needed was to plan my classes based on my students' interests. That is, organizing my lessons around themes that not only give structure and organization to my class, but also themes students can associate with their surroundings. So, that is why I wanted to carry out this project using theme base teaching. Approach that has been described by Cameron (2001) as follow:

Theme based teaching is that many different activities are linked together by their content; the theme or topic runs through everything that happens in the classroom and acts as a connecting thread for pupils and teacher. (P.180)

In this perspective, the author stands out that this approach structures languages learning experiences for children around the theme that is linked to several activities as a 'connecting thread' (189). Thus, this approach engages students to accomplish some activities using content and language in a helpful way to discover and figure out everything meaningful and interesting for them.

So, bearing in mind that theme-based teaching can provide a meaningful language learning experience. In order not only change the traditional teaching, but also to connect the

lesson with students' interest, reality and they could also learn in a meaningful way. I posed myself the following research question:

How can the uses of theme based teaching foster a meaningful language experience in a group of fourth grade at Miraflores Luis Eduardo Valencia Institution?

Theoretical framework

The following theoretical support presents the basic concepts and theories that frame this project. First, I give a definition about what meaningful learning is. Second, I define what theme based teaching is, its main purpose, why it is important to be considered in language teaching and how theme-based teaching fosters meaningful language experiences in the classroom.

Meaningful Learning

As for the language learning process, I consider that one of the aspects to keep in mind within the school is to make learning meaningful to students. The constructivist perspective of learning focuses the learning process on students' needs and interests over the traditional act of teaching, that is teacher-centered and it is focused on the transmission of knowledge rather than the active construction of knowledge by students themselves. In regard to this, Cajamarca and Piña (2010) affirm that 'meaningful learning involves new knowledge that is related to what the learner already knows, and it can be easily retained and applied' (p. 16). In other words, the structure of the students' previous knowledge determines the new knowledge and experiences, and these modify and restructure them. Thus, in languages teaching classrooms, teachers should provide a context where meaningful learning is possible, Ausbel (as cited in Oliveira et al. 2015)

assumed that “new knowledge will be more meaningful if the activities and materials are interesting to the learners. Through its cognitive activity, they can develop new meaning, which is significant or important to them” (p. 627). That is, teachers should promote meaningful content in which students are able to link their prior knowledge with the new information, as a construction process of their own theories of the world.

On top of that, I consider that learning becomes meaningful to students when it is connected to their real lives. Learning becomes meaningful when content is related to students’ needs and interests. Learning also becomes meaningful when it responds to students needs here and now. Meaningful learning happens when students can make sense of what they learn and use it in their real lives.

Theme based teaching

Because language teachers are invited to go beyond the grammatical perspective of teaching, which claims to believe that if students master grammar, they master language. Nowadays, we have many approaches for teaching languages that highlight other features of languages with its connection with students’ lives and interests. I decided to work with theme based teaching because I thought this approach could help me integrate language and content. I could be able to connect students’ real lives with themes of their interest. In this case, Snow, M., & Brinton (1997) state that “the thematic approach can be defined as application of a methodology and language from more than one discipline in examining a central theme” (p. 143). That is, students are given the opportunity to explore a topic of their interests from different subject areas and at the same time, they learn language. In other words, they use language to learn content. By building on their interests and life experiences, young people’s attitudes, skills

and knowledge are developed in meaningful ways. (Mumford, 1993, p.6). Essentially, students give meaning to the theme associating that particular part from the reality to which they refer or what they are interested in wanting to learn.

Moreover, Hsu and Lo (2009) state, “the main purpose of this approach is to allow learners learn the knowledge of the specific content area and increase their language skills naturally” (p.72). This approach incorporates real contexts where students can develop or become proficient in their four languages skill as, writing, reading, listening and speaking. Thus, Tessier & Tessier (2015) affirm, “the use of a theme help students learn about the subject via the ability to apply subjects to the theme and their lives, by increasing motivation, interest, comfort and by promoting learning by adding new knowledge to existing theme-established scaffolding” (p.15). That is, through the use of the themes facilitate the student have a connection between different contents of studies with their lives, which allows them to be more interested and motivated to participate in class where they can speak from their experiences, this way that knowledge could be strengthened and more significant.

On the other hand, Mumford. D. (2000) affirms “the theme may be chosen by the teacher or in collaboration with the students, or may develop from the interests of one or two students whose enthusiasm spreads to all their classmates” (p. 6). Concerning the negotiation process, I think this an aspect important because students could choose their topics of study; hence it could become more meaningful for them.

Thus, the teacher has the responsibility to promote the use of languages providing enough context, in which learners can develop their language skills; in the same way, planning the activities close to students’ interests. Therefore, “the role of the teacher becomes one facilitator,

who maintains a sense of the whole picture and a vision of the skills the students and lead them to make connections between prior and new knowledge acquired through classroom activities” (Mumford, 1993, p.4). For that reason, students need teachers to reflect and connect new knowledge with those already established, offering them subjects that allow them to develop their skills that allow them to use the language in a more spontaneous way, so that the student has the possibility to construct new knowledge from their experiences.

It is within the bounds of possibility that theme based teaching (...) “will enable students to make significant connections amongst things, people or events that enhance their real knowledge about the world and themselves” (Ward and Cook, p. 13:5). And as they make connections, they are able to construct their own theory of the world. On top of that, “the potential of theme based teaching to provide realistic and motivating use of the language with meaning and purpose for children” (Cameron 2001, p. 182) is amazing and challenging. In this case, children are able to transfer what they learn in class and apply it to their lives. Learning becomes more valuable and motivating students to delve into the theme.

As stated above, I find that theme-based teaching could help me organize the content and activities around students’ interests and real experiences, exposing students to the language in a natural way. Theme based teaching allows students not only express themselves, but also understand the features of a foreign language in a meaningful way.

Objectives

General objective

- To describe meaningful language experiences through the use of theme based teaching.

Specific Objectives

- Identifying what aspects of theme-based teaching foster meaningful language experiences.
- Explaining how theme-based teaching fosters meaningful language experiences.
- Reflecting on the benefits theme-based teaching has on children's language learning experiences.

Action plan

. This action research project is inscribed in the proposal done by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) who propose action research as a spiral of cycles where the stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The planning stage was carried out during the first semester of the practicum. During this time, observations were done with the fourth grade class and a personal journal was written to record the events within the classroom. Based on this, an issue for the action research project was framed and related information was gathered. This information included conversations with the Cooperating Teacher as well as the review of related literature. After having all this information collected, it was possible to develop a research plan to be carried out during the second semester of the practicum.

Through the acting stage, several activities and instruments were designed in order to collect and analyze data. The action plan was divided into two steps taken from January to March, as follow: first step was to adapt the proposal to the syllabus content required by the school. For the second step, I designed and implemented the units. The observation and reflection steps are part of the findings and interpretation stage of the research process.

Development of Actions

Bearing in mind that the main objective of this project was to promote meaningful language learning experiences through the use of theme-based teaching, I decided to organize the course program based on the institution syllabus. Four themes were selected and implemented in twelve lessons, namely my city, telling the time, my schedule and my favorite places.

As for the first term, I started implementing the thematic unit “my city” where students had the chance to learn the city places, community helpers, the community helpers’ roles and the means of transportation”. I had the objective of helping students understand the conceptualizations of each theme taking to account what they already know. Thus, students at the end of the unit they could identify the places, people who work in each place and what roles of each community helpers are. Finally, the different means of transportation that we can find in a city.

In order to accomplish that, I started to activate students’ previous knowledge about each theme, each student had to talk from their experiences. With students’ help, we created our definition. Then, for expanding the students’ thought, I used not only some flashcards for making

a list of the places of the city, community helpers and the means of transportation, but also a chart that allows the understanding the themes.

Concerning the city, we categorized the places according some aspects such as religion, education, economy, health, shopping, sporty, nutrition, attraction etc. I realized that the chart helped to recognize the places that were new to them. We developed some other activities such as games (Matching and hangman), building our city; among group of students had to paint different façade and the elements that place of the city had. At the end, we played “find my place in the city” using prepositions of place and with their eyes blindfold, listening to the teacher’s voice; the teacher was who guide them. Students had to arrive to the place the group was supposed to go.

In regard to community helpers, we categorized them according the places they work and their roles. We developed activities such as reading a book “whose hat is that”, sing a song “what do you do” and worksheets in which students had to choose the community helper they would like to be when they grow up. At the end of this unit, students had to do a short presentation in which their classmates had to guess what community helper their partner wanted to be. The last theme was about the means of transportation, we categorized them according the shape, speed, aquatic, terrestrial, aerial and what community helpers use. Some of the activities we did were sing a song “what do you see”, games (matching and Bingo) and we also completed some worksheets in which students had to identify the means of transportation and to mention what transport they use in their daily life.

As for the second term, the theme was telling the time. Students had the opportunity to learn numbers, the time, months of the year and days of the week. To learn the numbers, we began with “One, Two, Buckle My Shoe” song, students could start to count the numbers.

Based on this song we could develop different activities for students to count, paint and identify their school supplies and classroom elements. Then, students had the opportunity to play two games. First, numerical twister, in this game the students had to touch the numbers according two dices (one with numbers and other with the part of the body) thrown by the teacher. The second game was about Drop up and pick up the numbers game. Students had to pick up three numbers and dropped two numbers the teacher asked.

The last theme was “telling the time”. Students were able to identify and tell the time in different ways in relation with their daily routine. We began this theme singing the song “what’s the time”, identifying the theme that we were going to work on. Then, students had the opportunity to build their clock to get familiar with the parts of the clock (the numbers, minutes, hand hour and hand minute). Next, using the student’s clock, we studied two different ways to tell the time (formal and informal) and finally, students had the possibility to learn some daily routines they do in their regular life (get up, take a shower, go to school, have breakfast, have a lunch, leave to school, etc.) using the times.

It is important to mention that due the teacher’s strike, it was not possible to continue with the implementation of the units left. Fortunately, I had the chance to conduct the CT’s interview and the focus group. So, to answer my research question, I decided to use three qualitative techniques to gather specific information related my research project issue. First, during the action research process, I implemented the observation technique using a double-entry journal, a section devoted for description of the lesson, and the other for reflection of it.

According to Burns (2009) a teaching journal is a classic tool that allows to record the events and

happenings such as reflections, beliefs, teaching philosophies, ideas and insights about the teaching practice and histories of teacher researchers (p, 89).

Likewise, the focus group technique was implemented. According to (Leedey and Ormrod, 2005 as cited in Mertler, 2006, p.96) a focus group is a simultaneous interview of people making up a relatively small group, usually no more than 10 to 12 people. A main advantage of a focus groups is that they yield a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time (p. 51). Finally, after working with students I conducted the CT's interview at the middle of May. Altrichter (1993) claims that “interviews are communications that aim at getting to know points of view, interpretations and meanings in order to gain greater understanding of a situation” (p.100). At the end of this month, I charged of getting together all data for analyzing and interpreting them. In this way, I can obtain valid information that allow to solve my research question.

Findings and Interpretations

As for the analysis process, I decided to follow the steps suggested by Burns (1999) assembling data, coding data, comparing data, building interpretations and reporting outcomes. First, I gathered all the information obtained from the three different sources. Second, relevant results were organized into categories. Third, information obtained from my journal, focus group and interview was emptied into a chart in order to compare and triangulate the patterns I got from each source. Fourth, interpretations were built and finally, outcomes were reported.

As for the journal, meaningful language experiences were described as well as students' reactions regarding theme-based implementation. The journal was proof-read and codified into

some categories using colors to highlight emerging information using the descriptions of my lessons and the reflections of them. The focus group was recorded and conducted using a semi-structured interview that lasted 12 minutes long. The focus group audience consisted of fifteen students, six boys and nine girls. To explain how theme-based teaching fosters meaningful language experiences, I did not only transcribe the recording, but I also did a chart to categorize students' answers. Finally, the CT's interview was recorded and transcribed in order to reflect on the benefits theme-based teaching has on children's language learning experiences. Taking into account the objectives of this research three categories were found, each aiming at solving the research question. The categories found were: benefits of TBT, students' attitudes towards the class and teacher's methodology.

Benefits of TBT

In general, the benefits of theme-based teaching were very rewarding. The implementation of it, let me use students' previous knowledge as a basis for the expansion of knowledge and construction of meaning. In my classes, I could evidence students had the possibility to make new connections as they received demonstrations from my part. One example was found in my journal: "to activate their student's previous knowledge about the theme, I asked them what means of transportation they had used in their lives" (Journal 5, March 14th, 2017). According to Cajamarca and Piña (2010) affirm that "meaningful learning involves new knowledge that is related to what the learner already knows, and it can be easily retained and applied" (p. 16). In other words, students used previous experiences to understand new concepts and facts. The construction of knowledge goes from what they already know to what is unknown to them.

Therefore, during the classes students had the opportunity to explore content and learn language at the same time. It was also an opportunity for me to present language in a more contextualized way, which facilitated students getting familiar with new words and expressions they easily relate not only with the topic, but with the context it was put on. One source of information evidenced that students got involved with themes connected to their daily life as it was the case of the unit related to time, where students were able to talk and write about their daily routines, count their belongings using numbers and talk about the city places that had visited. (CT's interview, May 24th, 2017).

In this sense, Tessier & Tessier (2015) affirm, “the use of a theme help students learn about the subject via the ability to apply subjects to the theme and their lives, by increasing motivation/interest/comfort and by promoting learning by adding new knowledge to existing theme-established scaffolding” (p.15). That is, theme-based teaching not only facilitates learning, but also increases student interest as this approach links various content that add value to students' daily life activities.

Students' attitudes towards the class

Concerning this category, I can say it was one of the most important aspects in the development of my research project because the purpose was about themes and the activities were of students' interest. As it was evidenced by the focus group “the classes were fun, we learned English in a more entertaining and easy way”. (Focus group, May 23rd, 2017). That's why Ausbel (as cited in Oliveira et al. 2015) assumed that “new knowledge will be more meaningful if the activities and materials are interesting to the learners. Through its cognitive activity, they can develop new meaning, which is significant or important to them” (p. 627). It

means that, the more attractive the activities are, the more significant learning becomes since they respond to their needs and interests.

Teacher's methodology.

The last outcome was about the strategy implemented by the teacher, I could find that the strategies taught in class helped and facilitated English language acquisition; besides that, the activities motivated students to be more receptive during the process. Evidence of this was “the activities developed in the English class stimulate the learning of it”. Also, “the lessons were well planned, they were developed with good strategies and motivating for students” (CT's interview, May 24th, 2017). For that reason, “The role of the teacher becomes one facilitator, who maintains a sense of the whole picture and a vision of the skills the students and lead them to make connections between prior and new knowledge acquired through classroom activities” (Mumford, 1993, p.4). Basically, the strategies I had the chance to implement were really effective in a way that students got involved in learning the language as they explore themes of their interest. Language was essentially an instrument that allowed us learn about our world and our surroundings. We had the possibility to connect class themes with our real lives. When students have the possibility to use in their lives what they learn in class, learning becomes meaningful.

Conclusions and Suggestion

Considering that the main objective of my project was to describe how theme based-teaching foster a meaningful language experience in English language for primary students, I

could say that in general, theme-based teaching help language teachers contextualize language and consider students' needs and interest to bring content to class.

In regard to aspects identify that foster a meaningful language learning experience, I was able to recognize issues such as the benefits of theme-based teaching which mainly reported an increase in the motivation levels of the class. Likewise, students' attitudes towards the class changed since they found the class entertaining. And last but not least, the activities and strategies developed throughout the units, make my methodology appealing to students.

Explaining how theme-based teaching fostered a meaningful language experience, I could say that when I had the chance to let students bring their experiences to class and tell their anecdotes, and interest to learn the language emerge with the need to learn how to mean in English what they wanted to say. Furthermore, students felt motivated because they had the opportunity to interact with resources that facilitated learning of the language in a meaningful way.

As a reflection of implementing theme-based teaching in the language classroom to foster meaningful learning, I could say to conclude that when we organized our curriculum around students' needs and interests, we humanize the language classroom placing the student as the center of the class.

It would be important to give some suggestions to teachers interested in working with TBT. Firstly, observe closely to your students in order to identify their specific needs and interests. Individual differences might be encountered. However, use strategies that respond to all students and use talent students to help those with a slow pace of learning. Collaboration should

be promoted instead of competition. Secondly, balance content and language. There are times when we focused more on content than language and the other way around. Immerse students in the language as much as possible by using the target language to address the class.

Finally, I consider that school languages should propose to start the teaching practicum at the beginning of the academic year to avoid all kind of constraints to complete a meaningful experience. Continue the second part of the practicum at the beginning of the year with a new class and with a new CT usually brings a lot of inconveniences. The project does not always fit the new class needs and interests. Besides that, the rapport with the new CT sometime represents a challenging adaptation process. It is also important to maintain a constant communication with the school and keep students informed about the academic and cultural events to avoid the waste of time, money and class preparation.

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Appendix A

Focus group

Objetivo: Evaluar cómo la enseñanza basado en temas fomentó las experiencias lingüísticas significativas en los estudiantes de la clase de inglés.

1. ¿Consideras que a través de las actividades desarrolladas en clase han logrado aprende más inglés?

Si _____ ¿Qué cosas has aprendido?

No _____ ¿Por qué?

2. ¿Cómo prefieres aprender inglés?

Por medio de:

- Traducción de frases: Pasar las frases de Inglés a español
- Dictados: copiar las frases que dicta el profesor
- Memorización de palabras: Aprenderse de memoria una lista de vocabulario.
- Temas: Hablando y escribiendo en inglés sobre tópicos como la ciudad, los deportes, la hora, los números, lo que te gusta y lo que no te gusta.

¿Por qué? _____

3. ¿Consideras que los temas trabajados en clase están relacionados con tú vida?

Si _____

No _____ ¿Po qué?

4. ¿Cómo te parecieron los materiales utilizados en las lecciones?

- Muy interesantes
- Interesantes
- Poco interesante

¿Por qué? _____

5. ¿Las actividades desarrolladas en clase han sido de su interés?

Si _____

No _____

¿Por qué? _____

Appendix B

Teacher's Interview

Propósito: El propósito de esta entrevista es reflexionar sobre los beneficios y el impacto de la implementación de la enseñanza basado en temas en las experiencias significativas de aprendizaje del inglés en los estudiantes.

1. ¿Qué opinión tiene acerca de las actividades desarrolladas en clase?
2. ¿Cuál cree que fue los beneficios y el impacto de la implementación del aprendizaje basado en temas en la clase de inglés?
3. ¿Consideras que los temas trabajados en clase están relacionados con la vida de los estudiantes?
4. ¿Considera que a través de las actividades desarrolladas en clase, los estudiantes han logrado aprende más inglés?
5. ¿Tiene alguna sugerencia o comentario para mejorar nuestra practica de enseñanza?