

# Teaching English in Primary School through a Spiral Thematic Curriculum\*

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This article presents an experience of implementing a spiral thematic curriculum to teach English in a public primary school in Medellin. The design and implementation of this curriculum are part of an action research project that focuses on determining the effects of using it to teach English to children from kindergarten to fifth grade. The project involved the participation of a teacher from the primary school, six student teachers from the *Universidad de Antioquia* who are doing their practicum there, and the university advisor. The findings of this research were twofold: the children were involved in the process of learning a foreign language in a meaningful way, and their teachers (the student teachers) discovered a way to approach their task from a more student-sensitive and reflective perspective.

Key words: teaching EFL, children, primary school, theme-based instruction.

Este artículo presenta una investigación acción desarrollada en una escuela pública de Medellín. El proyecto consistió en el diseño, implementación y evaluación de un currículo temático en espiral para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en la básica primaria. Participaron seis practicantes de la Escuela de Idiomas de la Universidad de Antioquia, el asesor de práctica y el profesor cooperador del colegio. Los resultados de este proyecto mostraron cómo, tanto los niños como los practicantes se beneficiaron de este proceso al poder crecer y aprender juntos. Los niños comenzaron su proceso de aprendizaje del inglés de una manera significativa, y los profesores (practicantes) mejoraron su práctica como docentes a partir de una mirada reflexiva de la misma.

Palabras claves: enseñanza, inglés, niños, primaria, currículo temático.

Cet article présente l'expérience de mise en place d'un cursus thématique spiralaire d'enseignement de l'anglais dans une école primaire publique de Medellin. La planification et l'application de ce cursus font partie d'un projet de recherche-action destiné à observer les effets de son usage dans l'enseignement de l'anglais à des enfants de l'enseignement primaire. Le projet a engagé la participation d'un professeur de l'école, six étudiants-professeurs stagiaires et leur professeur-tuteur de l'Université d'Antioquia. Les résultats de cette recherche mettent en relief deux aspects principaux: Premièrement que les enfants furent impliqués consciemment dans le processus d'apprentissage de la langue étrangère, et deuxièmement que leurs professeurs (les professeurs-stagiaires) découvrirent un moyen d'envisager leur tâche dans une perspective plus réflexive et centrée sur l'apprenant.

Mots clés: enseignement, anglais, enfants, école primaire, cursus thématique.

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**ware of the importance of teaching a foreign language in primary schools, and compelled by the law (*Ley General de Educación, 1994*) to do so, several attempts to include English in the regular school curriculum have been made by some public primary schools in Medellín. The experience presented here is one of them. Given that there are lots of unanswered questions concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language in primary schools in Colombia, we decided to explore one way of doing it and check its effects. This project consists of the implementation of a thematic spiral curriculum in a public primary school in our city. It is a step towards the improvement of English teaching practices in our schools and also towards the articulation of research and teaching. The findings presented here correspond to the first implementation of this proposal throughout 2002. It is the initial stage of a long-term process that aims at teaching English in a meaningful way at primary level, and constitutes a springboard for further developments.

The first part of this article presents a description of the project: the setting, the methodology, the definition of the problem and the proposal itself; and the second part deals with the insights obtained from the experience. Finally, some conclusions and questions for future research projects are presented.

## THE PROJECT

### **The setting**

This project was carried out in the primary section of a public co-educational school located in a middle class neighborhood of Medellín, Colombia. As it is the case in many public schools in Colombia, the average number of students per group in this school ranges from 40 to 50. English classes are held once a week, and class periods are 45 minutes long. Even though there is neither a clear policy to teach English, nor enough resources to accomplish this task, the attitude of teachers and students towards the teaching and learning of English is very positive. Teachers recognize its importance and children seem to be motivated.



At the school, six student teachers from the School of Languages of the *Universidad de Antioquia* carried out their teaching practicum, and as part of that process they conducted an action research project called “A thematic spiral curriculum: an alternative to teach English in primary school”.<sup>1</sup> Even though the main goal was to determine the likelihood of such a curriculum to teach English to children in that context, this research also allowed us to gain a better understanding of our own reality and of our teaching practices.

It is important to note that it was the first time that English was taught in grades one to five in that school because previous attempts to teach English were individual efforts from some teachers or from some student teachers from the *Universidad de Antioquia*. As a result, there was not a clear school policy concerning this issue, there were no syllabi or clear guidelines as to how the teaching of English should be handled.

To address this problem, we decided to design a curriculum that could work as a general framework for the teaching of English in this institution. The first step of the process of designing the curriculum was a needs analysis that took place in February 2002, and regular observation of the school and the students, recorded in the student teachers’ journals. Some comments from these journals can help depict the situation found in the school. In general, groups were characterized by a very positive attitude towards the English language and the process of learning it. Some quotes taken from the student teachers’ journals illustrate this point:

*“Para ellos es novedoso escucharme hablar en inglés, son atentos y tienen muchas expectativas y se ven interesados...”* [1<sup>st</sup> grade student teacher journal, Feb. 21, 2002].<sup>2</sup>

*“Son muy perceptivos e ingeniosos; para entender lo que se les dice (tratamos de hablar la mayor parte del tiempo en inglés) se valen de nuestros gestos y acciones (de esta manera, vemos cómo el lenguaje*

1. Title in Spanish of the original project: Un currículo Temático en Espiral: Posibilidad del Inglés en la Básica Primaria.

2. Quotes from journal entries and interviews are taken verbatim.



*corporal es para ellos una herramienta bastante importante en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera.) , además cuando alguien no entiende los demás le explican (hay un buen ambiente de trabajo)” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher journal, Feb. 21, 2002].*

Student teachers observed that children had little knowledge of the language. Their receptive and productive skills were limited.

*“Es realmente muy poco lo que recuerdan sobre cualquiera de estos temas y son escasos los niños que verdaderamente tienen este conocimiento. En conclusión son muy escasas las palabras que los niños manejan y sólo saben pronunciarlas de manera suelta; no emplean ni frases ni oraciones cortas” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher journal, Feb. 21, 2002].*

The children were not familiar with some of the techniques used by the instructors when teaching a foreign language. As one teacher points out:

*“This activity, as many others in language teaching is not well known among students [...] We need to devote more time to explain how they work and what they are for” [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades teacher journal, Apr. 23, 2002].*

The challenge was then to keep students motivated and to help them learn English in a meaningful way. Hence the curriculum was aimed at achieving those two main goals with the children throughout this school year.

## Methodology

This study is an action research project as defined by Cohen and Manion (1994) “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and the close examination of the effects of such intervention.” (186)

The process we have gone through can briefly be described as follows: based on the observation of the context and the needs analysis, a problem was detected and strategies aiming at its solution were suggested and implemented. Reflection



nourished by observation, writing and interviewing, shed light on how effective this implementation was.

We collected the information needed through journals written by the student teachers, and by interviews conducted by the university advisor (also the researcher) with the student teachers and with the cooperating teacher at the school. It is also important to mention that some informal talks with students, as well as some unstructured questionnaires, were employed to determine students' points of view concerning their learning process.

A grounded approach was used to analyze the information collected in order to establish categories, draw conclusions and suggest changes that may lead to the improvement of the proposal.

### **Why a thematic-based curriculum?**

The guidelines given by the Ministry of Education for the teaching of Foreign Languages in our country, state that effective foreign language activities should be: interactive, learner-centered, meaningful, and interesting. These activities should also favor the development of each student's potential, and integrate students' new and prior knowledge. Taking these suggestions into account, a theme-based curriculum was selected as one of the possibilities to integrate other content areas with English, in terms of both techniques used and content covered. It is thus consistent with the definition of content-based instruction presented by Met (1991):

Content-based foreign language instruction uses learning objectives and activities drawn from the elementary school curriculum as a vehicle for teaching foreign language skills. The foreign language may be the sole vehicle for teaching the content, substituting for native language instruction; or, instruction through the foreign language may augment and supplement content instruction in the native language (281).

In our case the foreign language is used to reinforce concepts in other content areas so that children can make connections and associations that enhance their learning.



According to Salmon (1998), seven conditions favor the meaningful learning of a second language through thematic cycles (that she calls “*Núcleos Temáticos*”):

1. Immersion: thematic cycles expose children to different symbol systems. By interacting with other children and with the teacher, they discover the meanings of those symbols.
2. Demonstration: by exposing children to different kinds of texts, the teacher helps them to see how language works.
3. Expectation: it is important that teachers believe in their students' potential and help its development by offering challenging activities.
4. Responsibility: students should be gradually involved in the process of decision-making and taking responsibility in their own learning process.
5. Use: thematic cycles provide the students with the opportunity to use the language meaningfully and purposefully, because they will need it to gain access to information and to construct knowledge.
6. Approximation: by working with different topics, children will reinforce different content areas and will also explore the new language. In this process they will use their native, as well as their foreign language, to make sense of what they listen to or read. Hypothesis on how language works will be part of the process.
7. Response: Children need to be accompanied. That is why the classroom should be a place where children can interact with each other and with the teacher in order to confirm or discard their hypothesis. A language-rich environment is essential to provide the feedback they require.

The curriculum presented here was based on the needs analysis and observation of the context where it was going to be implemented. We took into account the recommendations given by the *Lineamientos Curriculares* and some aspects of Salmon's proposal.



## The proposal

As already mentioned, a thematic-based curriculum was chosen as the general framework to teach English at that primary school, as a feasible way to work with children in our context, and to attend to students' needs and interests.

Articulation between different grades was achieved by applying what Met (1991) calls "Expanding Horizons", a concept taken from Social Science and applied to foreign language teaching. According to this author, the social studies curriculum in elementary schools has been organized around the concept of expanding horizons. Students begin by studying about themselves (all about me), their families, and then their community and region and that of others (other countries, the world). Taking into account the similarity of this concept in social studies in Colombia, and adapting Met's proposal, this is the thematic core of our curriculum:

*Preschool: This is me*

*First: All about me*

*Second: My school and neighborhood*

*Third: Exploring my body*

*Fourth: My country*

*Fifth: My world*

Figure 1.



Figure 1 shows how the spiral gradually begins to expand in terms of the themes that children deal with. These are specifics of each grade in relation to the theme-based curriculum proposed. In preschool through second grade, linking English to children's lives has been paramount. In preschool and first grade children introduce themselves, talk about their families and about their toys, and pets. In second grade children still talk about themselves, but the horizon is expanded to include the school and the neighborhood. Thus, children talk about themselves, their classmates, the school, the subjects they like and dislike, their schedules, etc. They also talk about their community, the people who live there, their occupations, etc.

In these early grades teachers started using stories in the classroom. Several reasons support the use of stories in the classroom. Children love stories, thus motivation is increased. They also have background knowledge concerning the structure of stories in Spanish that can help them understand content. In addition, stories are useful because they present language as a means of communication; stories help students understand that language is a whole, not a collection of discrete parts. Even though student teachers still need to work more on the use of literature in the classroom, they recognize its importance in helping children explore the language and in creating a positive attitude towards the language. As one of the student-teachers mentions:

*"Les encanta la idea de trabajar con cuentos y participar de él, tratando de predecir lo que sigue. Además, disfrutaron mucho la actividad final" [Pre-school student teacher journal, May 14, 2002].*

*"Su comprensión auditiva es muy buena y su capacidad de imaginar me "descrestó", pues leían las imágenes y sabían lo que venía" [Pre-school student teacher journal, Apr. 9, 2002].*

*"They (students) told me in Spanish what happened in the story. They enjoyed the activity and they did a drawing according to the story in their notebooks taking into account everything they remembered about the story" [1<sup>st</sup> grade student teacher journal, Apr. 23, 2002].*

One aspect that was highlighted by one of the student teachers in her journal



was the fact that stories can help children develop strategies to construct meaning, not only from the written word, but also from pictorial clues:

*"La clase no debe ser todo el tiempo hablada, repetida o contada, sino que también de vez en cuando, lo que se dice soportarlo con imágenes, y así conscientizar a los alumnos que saber leer no es sólo asociar letras, sino también imágenes" [Preschool student teacher journal, Mar. 19, 2002].*

This is part of preschool goals, to start the process of literacy by having students interpret images, as well as words in print. In first grade, stories related to the topics of the units were also included in the syllabus, and these helped to contextualize the presentation of the foreign language.

In second grade the emphasis moves from the knowledge of the child him/herself, and his family, and expands to the school and the neighborhood. The connection is then to children's everyday life and experiences as well as to some contents in Social Science. They talk about their school life, about the people who play an important role in their community, about some places near the house and the school, etc.

In third grade a stronger connection between English and one of the content areas - Natural Science- starts. The main topic of this grade is the body, what we can do with it and how we can take care of it. Students describe people's physical appearance, talk about the five senses and their functions, and finally they discuss ways of being healthy. The syllabus of this grade is important because of its transitional character. In the first place it constitutes a review of topics previously studied by the children in first and second grade. In the second place, it starts the connection with content areas that will be part of fourth and fifth grades. The student teacher of this grade points out:

*"I wanted to make my syllabus taking into account the other subjects, because it's not only English that we have to teach. We, as teachers have big responsibility with our students. We can/must teach things that reinforce other subjects and things that are going to be used in their lives. And a content-based syllabus is a good way to teach*



*English and to get what I want. This is the first time I try to do this so, I hope I will make it good” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher student teacher journal, Jan. 22, 2002].*

In fourth and fifth grades the focus is on the country and the world respectively. In fourth grade children talk about different places in our country, describe famous Colombian people, talk about the weather and about holidays and celebrations. In fifth grade they talk about countries and nationalities, famous people around the world, tourist places, weather and seasons, and they also compare holidays and celebrations in our country with those around the world. Another topic in this grade is the blue planet, in which children talk about ecology, and reflect on the situation of our environment. However, the link to students’ lives was not overlooked in these grades. As we can see from student teachers’ journals:

*“To start the class, we did a brainstorming about the countries which were going to go to the football World Cup” [4<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher journal, Apr. 25, 2002].*

*“From this experience I’ve learnt that it’s really possible and even more effective, introducing content, avoiding explicit grammar. That’s why they [students] didn’t care so much about structure, but about what they were saying” [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher journal, May 21, 2002].*

*“We only had a brainstorming on celebrations from Colombia and from other countries” [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher journal, May 23, 2002].*

Concerning the latter comment, Curtain and Pesola (1994) highlight some specific cultural aspects that could be integrated into the foreign language class. They include among others: significant national or geographic monuments, symbols associated with holidays, traditional stories and games, celebrations and holidays, currency and coins, etc.

As can be seen, this curriculum aims at learning language through content and learning content through language. We also expect to maintain and increase the



positive attitude of children towards the language. The following section discusses whether these goals were achieved and presents some recommendations for further applications of this proposal.

## FINDINGS

The process of teaching English at that school has yet to be consolidated in order to determine the effectiveness of this thematic-based curriculum on a long-term basis. However, after having implemented it for one school year, findings reveal positive aspects concerning the learning process of both teachers and children.

This thematic curriculum has been an effective tool to help children learn English. According to the reports given by the student teachers at the end of the last term, most of the children achieved the goals for every grade. Journal entries and interviews, as well as ongoing - sometimes informal- assessment of students' performance, also revealed that children started developing skills to understand and use the foreign language.

*“Pues yo considero que hasta ahora los resultados han sido excelentes porque los niños, escasamente uno de cada grupo había tenido contacto con algo de Inglés [...] ya uno hace cualquier pregunta de cualquier tipo [...] ellos entienden, ellos responden” [Preschool student teacher interview, Jun. 7, 2002].*

*“Saben describir una persona, no así super ampliamente, pero sí lo saben hacer. Y también le saben decir si está triste o está contento, por lo menos contestarte cuando vos le preguntás” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher interview, Jun. 7, 2002].*

*“De contenidos saben mucho. Pues ellos saben preguntar en Inglés por lugares, lo que decía ahora por capitales, por países. Identifican cuando uno les pregunta por países, por ciudades” [4th-5th grades teacher interview, Jun. 7, 2002].*

As can be seen in the following quotes, children were learning English and at



the same time reinforcing some concepts of other content areas such as numbers, countries and cities, parts of the body, and senses.

*"The class was successful because students identify well the colors and the numbers and they also learnt new vocabulary that will be used in future classes" [2nd grade student teacher journal, Apr. 23, 2002].*

*"Yo me a aprendi de en la materide inglés los 5 sentidos, el organo, las partes del cuerpo como las manos, los pies, la nose, los ojos, los hoidos" [3rd grade student comment].*

It is important to remark that children have not only progressed in their knowledge of the language, but they have additionally increased their motivation towards the foreign language and their awareness of the importance of learning English. The following comment illustrates this point:

*"Si me gusta [la clase de inglés] por la rason de lo que la profe Catalina nos enseña es para un vien de nosotros y si de pronto nos mandan para un pais poder utilizar todo lo que nos enseño" [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student comment].*

Children also manifested a positive attitude towards the activities carried out in class.

*"Me gustó también los juegos de inglés, las descripciones de cualquier personaje"*  
*[4th grade student comment].*

*"Lo que me gustó de la clase fueron las actividades que nos ponían como: buscar y unir las capitales con los países" [5<sup>th</sup> grade student comment].*

Another finding is that the children started to develop some strategies to understand the new language and to cope with the new techniques that teachers are using in the class:

*"Although they (the students) did not know all the vocabulary, they*



*understood the story, they enjoyed it and they created it with their own words” [2nd grade teacher journal, Apr. 15, 2002].*

*“The gap technique failed, but at last (and least) they could see and read the nationalities and started getting familiar with some of them” [4th and 5th grade student teacher journal, Apr. 25, 2002].*

Even though it was not one of the stated goals of this project, we found that besides learning language and content, children reflected on their learning process and performance.

*“Algunos niños fueron un desempeño muy grande llo mostre un poco de desempeño” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student comment].*

*“One girl (3.1) told me that by singing songs they learn better” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher journal, May 9, 2002].*

In brief, the analysis of the data gathered seems to reveal that through the implementation of this thematic curriculum, children have:

- Successfully started the process of learning a foreign language.
- Reinforced some topics in other content areas.
- Increased their motivation towards language learning.
- Started implementing strategies to cope with the new language.

Concerning student teachers, the analysis of journal entries has made evident the improvement of their teaching performance based on reflection. At the beginning of the Practicum, their concerns focused mainly on the “here and now” of their practice. Handling discipline, for example, was considered paramount in determining the success of a class.

Given that student teachers were having their first teaching experience, they were required to learn at the same time how to teach, how to teach children, and how to work with a thematic approach to the teaching of English. As a



result it was common at the beginning to see how student teachers tended to have grammar-centered classes.

*“Objective: students use possessive adjectives in usual expressions” [1<sup>st</sup> grade student teacher journal, Mar. 5, 2002].*

*“Then we practice introducing a third person using her/his. This was harder, but they got it” [3<sup>r</sup> grade student teacher journal, Feb. 26, 2002].*

However, their attention gradually focused on the children’s learning process and their attitude towards the class.

*“I think when I plan an activity like this, I should think before how to organize and predict possible problems with regard to discipline issues” [5<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher interview, Apr. 26, 2002].*

*“The most important thing I learnt from this is the activities [...] can’t be too long because it is so difficult to keep students concentration for much time” [2<sup>nd</sup> grade student teacher journal, Apr. 2, 2002].*

In their final journal entries student teachers started to reflect on their performance as teachers, on the strategies they were going to implement in order to achieve the objectives, and making their teaching more effective.

*“I have to use different strategies with this group and to devote much more time preparing materials for students in 4<sup>th</sup>” [4<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher journal, May 2, 2002].*

*“From this experience I’ve learnt that it is really possible and even more effective introducing content avoiding grammar” [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades student teacher journal, May 21, 2002].*

One of the most important findings related to the process of becoming teachers was that student teachers realized that they should consider the teaching of English as a means to promote values, and a way to contribute to the children’s personal development.



*“... saben respetarse a sí mismos [estudiando las partes del cuerpo], respetar a los otros, saben que esto no se puede hacer porque vamos a hacerle daño a la otra persona, le vamos a dañar un dedo, le vamos a dañar la mano [...] pues tratar de meter valores también dentro del Inglés” [Preschool student teacher interview, Apr. 26, 2002].*

*“La parte que yo trabajo con los niños de, ellos, como ayudarles a tener mayor seguridad en la parte afectiva [...] yo no puedo, eso no existe, a mi no me gusta esa palabra y les conté el cuento de una tortuguita . . .” [3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher interview, Apr. 26, 2002].*

*“They themselves said we didn’t respect this rule and so on, and it was good because they are only children, however they recognized, at least their weaknesses” [4th-5<sup>th</sup> grades student teacher journal, May 17, 2002].*

*“What I could see is that for them [2.1 group students] it is difficult to work in groups because although there was material for everyone, they didn’t share it, and they did an individual work” [2<sup>nd</sup> grade, student teacher journal, May 16, 2002].*

Journals and interviews revealed that student teachers have started to become reflective teachers and have improved their teaching performance on the basis of such reflection. It is important to mention that for these novice teachers, who were learning how to teach children by actually doing it, the journal became a key instrument to learn about the process of teaching English to children.

To summarize, findings of this research evidence show that children and teachers are growing together.

## CONCLUSION

Even though great efforts have been made in our country to implement a foreign language in the regular primary school curriculum, a more systematic and reflective examination of the process is needed. This project has shown how we can start understanding our own reality and discovering our own ways of teaching English to children in public schools. It is thus an invitation to look at ourselves in a reflective way in order to find alternatives for improvement.



In the case of this theme-based curriculum, although successful up to this point, unanswered issues still exist and the need to improve some aspects has been highlighted. Student teachers as well as the cooperating teacher, stress the need for continuity of the program at the school.

*“Yo digo que el problema podría ser cuando la continuidad se pierde. O sea, cuando por alguna razón no se puede hacer un proceso continuo. Tanto por los que llegan sin haber visto inglés, como por los que llegan con el inglés de coquito de verbos y ya” [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade student teacher interview, Jun. 7, 2002].*

Another important issue related to continuity that remains unexplored, is the articulation of this kind of work with the process of teaching English in high schools. We believe that the thematic-based curriculum proposed here for primary schools could likewise be implemented in high schools. The question of how it should be done remains unanswered.

Hand in hand with the need for continuity goes that of increasing the number of weekly hours devoted to English at the school. It is important for children to have more contact with the foreign language so that more opportunities are provided for them to listen, read, write and speak in English because those opportunities are scarce outside the classroom.

Another problem we found was the lack of resources at the school. Teachers had to be very resourceful and look for materials in different sources. Connections with other institutions that can provide materials can be a helpful tool to support the development of a curriculum like the one we are proposing here.

And finally, more involvement of children in decision-making is required if we are to move towards a more learner-centered language teaching.

This paper has shown how, through action research, teachers can determine weaknesses and strengths concerning their performance in specific teaching-learning contexts, and can start trying out solutions. A more reflective look at our teaching practices and the beliefs underlying them will enhance our understanding of this complex reality, and will help us move towards a more enlightened approach to teaching.



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