Promoting Language Learning through a Thematic Vocabulary-Based Syllabus in Different Grades

Incentivar el aprendizaje de una lengua a través de un programa de estudio basado en vocabulario temático para distintos niveles

Yanilis Romero
Universidad de Córdoba
(Montería, Colombia)

Abstract
This research explores a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus, which can help public and private schools develop good practice of English as a foreign language teaching for different audiences. Additionally this paper proposes possible approaches for teaching English content. The researcher considered communicative trends to create dynamic teaching settings and used data collection techniques such as: interviews, class observation, need analysis, questionnaires, video recording, and stimulated recall. This five-month action research project analyzed the application of the thematic vocabulary-based syllabus. Three main findings can be reported. First, the use of a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus enhanced learning and promoted motivation. Second, oral production was increased while students were taught using content of their preference. Third, the content of the area is more interesting when learners are participants in the selection of the topics to be taught; students' participation was active since they could use their prior knowledge during the classes.
Key Words: Content-based instruction; thematic-based; vocabulary; motivation; ESL; action research.

Resumen
Esta investigación explora un programa de estudio basado en vocabulario temático con el objetivo de ayudar a instituciones públicas y privadas a desarrollar la buena práctica de la lengua inglesa como lengua extranjera para públicos diferentes. Adicionalmente, este ensayo propone posibles enfoques para la enseñanza de contenidos en inglés. La investigadora hizo uso de enfoques comunicativos para crear ambientes de enseñanza dinámicos así como de las técnicas de recolección de datos a continuación: entrevistas, observaciones de clase, análisis de necesidades, cuestionarios, grabación en vídeo y estimulación por recuerdo. Este proyecto de investigación-acción que se realizó durante 5 meses analizó la aplicación de un programa de estudio basado en vocabulario temático. Se reportaron tres hallazgos. En primer lugar, el uso de programas de estudio basados en vocabulario temático mejoró el aprendizaje y promovió la motivación. En segundo lugar, los estudiantes incrementaron su producción oral al mismo tiempo que aprendían a usar los contenidos de su preferencia. Finalmente, el contenido del área se hace más interesante cuando los estudiantes participan en la selección de los temas que se van a enseñar; la participación de los estudiantes fue activa debido a que pudieron usar su conocimiento previo durante las clases.

Palabras Claves: Instrucción basada en contenidos; instrucción basada en temas; vocabulario; motivación; ESL; investigación-acción.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a complex process to carry out, since it deals with a great amount of factors needed to have success when teaching and learning. The effectiveness of the language learning seems to be dependent on aspects such as type of program, curriculum, number of hours devoted to English class, techniques and activities used. In this sense, the following will show an alternative possibility to approach different audiences' interest and promote language learning through an elaborated tool which emerged from needs studied in two schools in Monteria whose context and needs analysis may fit into a great number of public schools in the city. The aforementioned instrument is called thematic vocabulary-based syllabus (TVBS) to promote language learning.

This pattern syllabus was created for different ages especially for children and young learners focused on some strategies of study to maximize learners' potential in and out of classrooms through which the students were able to show an affective and cognitive positive attitude towards language learning.

This article will describe some of results that were shown after exploring a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus in different grades and the most important outcomes when having introduced special methods, materials and activities to promote language learning in terms of positive attitude, vocabulary learning and oral production. The project utilized action research with clearly defined stages to allow teachers to identify, investigate, find and apply a solution, report on results, and finally, make recommendations about how to improve teaching strategies and students' language learning.

THEORIES UNDERPINNING THIS RESEARCH

Appropriateness of a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus

Early or pre-secondary teaching of a foreign language has to follow the general principles of language didactics, while being subject to the principles of primary level pedagogy. Since children and young adults entering primary and secondary school are characterised by greater diversity of capabilities to grasp meaning, every teacher has to choose alternatives regarding the aims of syllabi and methods. Since teaching children is different than adults; the researcher considered appropriate to explore and eventually apply a TVBS.

Second language teaching is most successfully acquired when the conditions are similar to those presented in first language acquisition; that is when the focus of the learning is on meaning rather than on form. This suggests that the focus of the second language classroom should be on something meaningful, such as topics or themes. In general, the best way for young learners to grasp meaning is through visualizing and experiencing; since they are directly involved with the topic to be studied, all these items are offered by a thematic-based syllabus.

Another positive characteristic of a theme-based syllabus is that it is flexible, which means that it allows changes to better proceed in order to supply all the existing needs or satisfying students' wants and expectations.

A thematic vocabulary-based syllabus to promote language learning

In this research study, a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus was introduced to promote language learning in different grade levels at a couple of schools in Monteria. The syllabus was thematically organized which helped to achieve the aim. The scope and sequence is expressed in terms of topics to be developed and activities to be performed to improve language learning and promote vocabulary learning and not in terms of linguistic aspects to be mastered in the target language but in terms of oral production and motivation.

The scope and the sequence strives to suggest age-appropriate topics and activities (age range was 8-16), but they are not compulsory. It is recommended that the teacher select topics and activities according to students' needs, interests, cultural background and language knowledge (Willis, 1996).

Every syllabus has its own organization depending on the population. Each syllabus unit in this sample thematic vocabulary-based syllabus consists of six components as follows:

- **Title:** The title of the unit is related to the students' interests and serves to introduce the broader dimension of work to be undertaken in each unit.
- **Goal:** The goal describes what is expected to be carried out by the students. The goal, that is to say, the outcome is explicitly written in the form of an objective so that students understand what it is that they are expected to accomplish.
- **Theme:** Taking into account the students' topics of interest, themes are selected, graded and sequenced. Actual knowledge of English in terms of lexis is taken into account. Content was selected from textbooks based on the theme-based syllabus approach to vocabulary teaching and learning such as: world club intro, Heinemann children games, and games for children.
- **Theme-cycle:** This component comprises two parts—a warm-up activity and then reinforcement activities.

The warm-up activity can last about ten to twenty minutes (Willis, 1996). Students explore the topic with a song, a playlet, a story or simply an activity that involves all learners. Relevant exposure to the target language is crucial and should create interest in doing the activity.

In the second phase, the work and reinforcement activities encourage learners to use the language they know to carry out the activities (in pairs, group or individually). In this second phase the teacher is meant to be a monitor and facilitator to encourage students as they are gaining experience and exposure with the target language. The emphasis on vocabulary is placed in each activity, for example when exchanging information in the activities so that they can gain the lexis being studied. There should be some emphasis on vocabulary learned and also on the skills pupils are developing (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) since in the activities the abilities are implicitly involved with one unit or another.

- **Language focus:** Grammatical structures, and vocabulary related to the topics of study are emphasized. Content for the students is taken into account and described in this section. Exercises on the board and in written form on paper are practiced and students comment on them. Specific features of the language used during the theme cycle are analyzed in this section.
- **Recycling and evaluation:** In this component students can show what they have learned during the classes, though, learners are evaluated in every class as it is considered by the researcher, since the teacher may assure that the students are not unfairly assessed by one or two test formats (Brinton, 1919, p 187).

METHODOLOGY

As this research project had to do with a concrete localized problem (the lack of a syllabus) and it was found after reflecting about some other teachers' teaching practice, action research was chosen as a method to investigate. Action research is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

For organizational purposes, the researcher decided to divide it into two parts, a pre-intervention phase and an intervention one.

Context

Profile of students and educational institution

The 105 students involved in this project were from primary and secondary grades in two schools in Monteria. One of the schools is public and the other is a private school, which belongs to an ONG organization. Students' English exposure is quite limited, especially in the case of the public school students. The majority of these students come from low-income families.

Most of them show interest in recreational activities and a good attitude toward new materials and ideas. The whole target group showed enthusiasm at the time of responding to any request done by the researcher.

Stages of the research project, data collection, and treatment of the information

To collect the data, the research team chose the procedures to elicit relevant information. Selinger and Sohamy (1989) stated that the quality of a research study depends on the information obtained.

The majority of the information obtained came from the students, the coordinator, the principal and the teacher of the target institution. Part of the information was taken from the P.E.I. (Proyecto Educativo Institucional) of the institution, curricular guidelines, and standards. The information that follows will give account of the procedures to collect the data in the pre-implementation stage of the project, and then the implementation stage procedures will be presented accordingly:

- **Pre-intervention stage procedures:**
  - **Needs analysis:** The needs analysis process comprised two parts: students´ background and a language proficiency test. Graves (1996) suggests that in a needs analysis, objective and subjective needs can be assessed. To assess objective needs, useful information can include students´ background, culture, family, age, education, future profession and so forth.
  - **Classroom observation:** This procedure allowed data collection in descriptive research by observing the target language acquisition or its behaviour to collect the data.
  - **Questionnaires:** According to Selinger and Sohamy they are instruments used to collect data from large groups of subjects. The researcher may manipulate questionnaires with the purpose to gather information about school policies of the sample and/or about the circumstances surrounding the participants.
  - **Interviews:** They describe learners' state during English learning activities.
- **Implementation stage procedures:**

- o **Stimulated recalls:** This technique helps the researcher to obtain information about the insights into the process as such information would be rather difficult to obtain by other means.
- o **Videotaping:** The researcher chose to videotape not only to analyse aspects such as methodology, attitudes, exposure to the language, but also to have actual evidence of the work done.

Treatment of the information

The data was analysed by categorizing the questions that were included in the different procedures and by using descriptive conclusions illustrated in pie charts. Then ,two kinds of analysis took place: qualitative, taking into account the information shown by the instruments and the application of the thematic vocabulary-based syllabus; and quantitative, by using graphics. This allowed classification and evaluation of the data obtained in terms of quality.

FACT FINDINGS (PRESENTATION OF THE DATA FOUND IN THE PRE-INTERVENTION STAGE)

The information presented here resulted from the actual application of the elicitation techniques proposed in the pre-intervention stage. A careful analysis was made after gathering the necessary information. This data was first assembled with the purpose of doing an initial examination and setting down researcher's own thoughts, ideas, and impressions.

The following explains the categories found in the pre-implementation stage:

- **Content selection and activities preferred:** It is important to mention that the English teacher who is not a professional English teacher yet reported that when selecting and grading the content of the area, he takes what he thinks is necessary and suitable for children in fifth grade. That is to say, the content of the subject to be taught is left exclusively to his intuition and little knowledge about the language. It was evident that what the teacher does is in accordance with the requirements allotted by the MEN through "the standards" which state that "teachers, parents, students, school directors, and head municipalities authorities should be guided by the standards to know what is going to be taught and learned in the English subject" (Standards 2007).
- **Methodology:** The fifth-grade teacher described his methodology in the English class as follows: he greets the classroom in Spanish then starts talking about the importance of getting to know some words in English. He writes the name of some objects on the board and has them copy the words and then pronounces the words twice and makes them repeat the words. However, students seemed not to be satisfied with their teacher`s approach, as it was observed that they became bored and distracted during the classes.
- **Students' motivation:** It was noticed that students' motivation was relatively low, since in the class observation it was possible to see that students did not take an active role or participate in the class. The reason for this could be that the activities were boring and the methodology was not appropriate nor engaging.
- **Evaluation:** The teacher of fifth grade showed great interest in evaluating through the use of written tests, or just dictating some words for the children to be written on a sheet of paper.

- **Students' topics of interest:** Learners' interests play an important role in the learning process, since they should be the starting point when lesson planning. A high percentage of children reported in the needs analysis that they would like to deal with topics related to the weather, clothes, animals, food and fruits, school materials, etc. Students reported as well that they would like to deal with these themes since they may have something to talk about.

INTERVENTION PHASE AND FINAL RESULTS

The results of the pre-intervention stage confirmed and reinforced the idea that what the schools needed was a well-organized syllabus to improve students' language learning and development of the communicative competence. Therefore, the following was the proposal made to cover the existing needs and the rationale of the selection done.

The researcher designed a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus for fifth, seventh, and ninth grades which comprised three units each: ice-breaking unit, unit one, and unit two. Additionally, a grid was designed to outline the unit format and development, including the applicable activities.

In general terms, each unit had a title, identified a language function, objectives, language focus, warm-up, and activities to develop the theme. These latter are graded and organized from the easiest to the most difficult in each unit. They are varied since it is possible to find listening, speaking and reading activities from the very beginning until the end. When stating each activity, instructions and procedures were in very simple and clear language for learners.

The following relates the effectiveness of the application of the thematic vocabulary-based syllabus had on most of students' learning of English. The information that follows represents the work undertaken throughout three months approximately, comprising all the units designed. Regardless of local constraints (lack of electricity, poor classroom conditions) and time constraints (extra curricular activities) which represented a negative barriers to the actual application of the syllabus, it is possible to say that very positive results were produced from the application of the sample thematic vocabulary-based syllabus. Before analyzing the categories it is necessary to say that the actual application of the activities was not expected to be perfect, for this reason there is evidence that some activities were changed or modified, reflecting the nature of this piece of research. The categories found are described in the following subsections.

Vocabulary learning

During the development of the classes it was found that students gained more than thirty new words out of fifty through the study of interesting topics; basic vocabulary related to clothes, weather, body parts, and animals were acquired as well as some structures regarding the verb "to be," possessive adjectives, and demonstratives. The learning of these new words and patterns was done through the use of games such as Simon Says, songs, and stories, which ensure students' motivation and involvement in the activities. Changes in student attitude were noted in the stimulated recall when a great number of pupils from different groups and grades expressed their happiness for the range of words gained during the intervention phase (for example, introducing yourself, greetings, weather).

After the actual application of units zero and one, the research team realized that students' performance in fifth grade was not excellent but good since prior knowledge on the grammatical items studied was relatively low due to the fact that most of these children did not

have clear ideas about the distinction between verbs from nouns, or vice versa. This explains why learners were confused about the distinction of the pronoun *he* with the article *the* among other cases. For example, the research team noticed that many of these children did not know what personal pronouns were even in Spanish, which makes it more challenging to teach them grammar in English. This fact explains the inclusion of some changes in which the research team had to analyze how to explain more effectively the difference in use of these two words. The teacher had to explain the difference between pronouns and articles several times using objects from the classroom and the names of students to help students understand.

Some changes in the explanation of the grammar items helped to carry out the classes much better than before and to maximize the process as it was expected from the very beginning. But it is relevant to mention that the constraint aforementioned could be overcome because fifth graders responded positively to the whole learning process in which they were involved.

Students' motivation

Concerning students' participation and attitudes in the classes, it was proved that students' motivation rose when they got engaged in every activity during the classes. That is to say, they become active participants in the whole process.

The reason for increased motivation was that the atmosphere was familiar to the learners and it prompted spontaneous participation, especially when they were playing games and singing songs. Amazingly, all of them wanted to participate in the stimulated recall because they wanted to express their opinion about the classes. What is more, the fact that they were given the opportunity to participate in the content selection was an effective way to keep them aware of what was going on in the classroom.

Oral production

It was found that fifth graders, for example, were really happy to see their own oral work, since their oral production improved throughout the application of the thematic vocabulary-based syllabus. For instance, once in a class at the beginning of the process, one student seemed to be bewildered to see how her classmates were pronouncing some words in English as she stated, "*Hum, José que bien pronuncias las estaciones del año. Repítelo, para yo decirlo.*" ("Hum, Jose pronounces the seasons in the year really well. Repeat them, so that I can say them.)

It is also important to mention that their oral work became more visible due to the fact that they dealt with topics that they liked and they found more things to say and in some cases they expressed personal experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

After the application of this research project, the researcher demonstrates that games and songs are important and vital tools for students' learning process. Because they stimulate students to learn language by enjoying what they do in the classroom, they can either supplement the core material or replace activities that children and young learners' dislike or feel uncomfortable with, and games can make the lesson planning easier. Once games have been played a few times and students feel comfortable with them, teachers will be able to insert topics into the program regarding the national standards with very little preparation.

Another relevant aspect to mention is that the activities designed with students' topics of interest increased their possibilities to participate actively because they had more to say about the topic.

A thematic vocabulary-based syllabus designed with student topics of interest increased students' motivation because they found all the activities meaningful and in this way positive outcomes can be achieved. However, this whole process was not easy due to the fact that several constraints appeared.

One of them was students thinking about the subject. At the beginning, it was difficult to work with them because they were not accustomed to these kinds of activities and they did not feel confident. Another constraint were the interferences such as strikes, holidays, and teachers meeting.

Despite these constraints, the effort to use a thematic vocabulary-based syllabus helped the researchers to obtain positive outcomes, as it was found that children were able to successfully use all the terms during activities.

REFERENCES

Ames, C. & Ames, R. (1989). *Research in motivation in education*, Vol 3. San Diego: Academic Press.

Binton, D. (1993). *Content- based instruction*. TESOL Matters.

Dubin, E., and Olshtain, E. (1986).*Course design: Developing programs and materials for language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graves, K. (2000). *Designing languge courses: A guide for teachers*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Ley General de Educación. (1994).

Lineamientos Curriculares Lengua Extranjera. (1999).

Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology*. Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner-centred curriculum*. Cambridge Cambridge University Press.

WiIIis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Longman.

BIODATA

Yanilis Romero has four years of teaching experience. She began working at the Universidad de Córdoba and has vast experience at all levels of private and public schools. Currently, she is a specialist of English Language Teaching from Universidad de Córdoba and a member of the trainees from the national bilingual program held in Montería, Colombia. Her research interests include content-based instruction and topic-based syllabus design and implementation.