

Theme-based Teaching and Learning

(based on Lynne Cameron: Teaching Languages to Young Learners)

Theme-based teaching can cover one, two or more lessons a week, or even several weeks. Many different activities are **linked together by the content**. It is very demanding for the teachers, as they have to be good at organization and in technical skills. It offers wide repertoire of resources, activities for children of all abilities, pair and group work. Theme-based teaching seems to be natural especially at a basic school where children spend the day together with one teacher. The day may be focussed on one topic where all aspects of the topic appear and English language is used. It better suits the way that young children learn. The textbooks we use in English lessons use topics and themes to structure their unit. The structuring is often superficial, as grammar or functional sequence is usually highlighted. Using theme-based teaching can **extend teaching and learning outside the textbook**.

First the teacher (might also be with children sometimes) **chooses the topic**, and then plans the activities, and how other subjects, like maths, science, art, language, history, geography, music and so on can be incorporated. When the teacher wants the pupils to be involved in the choice of the topic, s/he can give them the list of topics and let them choose.

The links between the foreign language and other subjects works in several directions and provide realistic and motivating uses of language:

1. Other subjects offer teaching techniques, methods, and the content, of course;
2. English language can also provide content for other subjects' areas;
3. Finally whole subject lessons can be taught in English.

The teacher has to decide which out of the three directions and to what extent will be used. Even an experienced teacher will need careful planning of a theme in advance, to prepare sub-themes, materials and tasks and to identify the language learning aim in each activity as well as in the whole complex. There might be more **activities** prepared in advance and children can choose the activities and decide in what sequence they will be done. They can list the activities and number them, which teaches them to make decisions.

When the planning goes on with the pupils, two techniques are the best: **brainstorming and a web** (spider-gram). Once the topic is given pupils brainstorm and write the list of all associations and collocations they can remember. When they write the topic in the centre and the ideas around in ovals or boxes linked with the centre they do the web. In this way **sub-themes** are prepared. The brainstorming can also produce guiding questions, which will be answered during working.

Now the teacher with the pupils starts building up a **collection of materials**. They can be authentic materials on the trips and from magazines, the Internet sources etc. all in English if possible. The availability of materials can affect the choice of sub-themes. Texts will include songs, rhymes, video, stories, CD-ROMs, catalogues, leaflets, magazines, and also educational materials written for native speaker children. When pupils use the Internet to search for materials, they practice using key words and skimming techniques. The pupils have to read first few sentences from the texts found and then skim the text to decide whether it belongs to what they need and whether it is worth reading. Of course, the teachers can surf the Internet to find suitable materials, copy them and use as paper-based text.

Next we have to plan the English **language perspective**. It will be organized into stages. Good timing with the stages is planned afterwards. The language perspective should be build on what the pupils already know, it should match their interests, be adequate to their age and extend their language learning. In course books the language is selected in advance. In theme-based teaching there is a certain degree of unpredictability about the language. That's a

demanding task for the teacher. S/he must anticipate the language, predict what will be needed, and be flexible enough when other needs in language appear. Anyway, learning English is much more complex and natural this way. This does not mean that the course book can be forgotten. Theme-based teaching can bring new vocabulary enriching the topic from the course-book. Words will appear in the new context of a theme. New meanings can be added. Thanks to the context, children can detect the meaning themselves. Words will appear in different types of discourse, both spoken and written. The discourse types can be history, science, cookery, reports, recipes, graphs, charts, and commentaries.

When children want to express something about the theme they try to be precise. We should distinguish between precision and accuracy. **Precision** involves learners selecting the language to say or write exactly what they mean. Precision is user-oriented. **Accuracy** means using the language correctly relative to the target form. Accuracy is language oriented.

As we go on working with the theme, pupils will start producing sentences, poems, pictures, reports, graphs etc. These can be saved in their personal **portfolio**. The pieces of work make a record of what has been covered, done, taught and learnt for the pupils and for other people. There are other possibilities how the results can be presented (see Cameron):

Big books produced by the class or groups of pupils

A magazine or newspaper

Pieces of writing, posters, pictures on the classroom walls or school notice board.

Video with spoken commentary

Performance, acting out a story, presenting a report

Computer record, web pages around the theme on the school website

CD-ROM with video and text.

Most of the results mentioned above are now called projects. Parents, other classes, teachers are possible **audiences**. Even pupils from other schools can see and read the product if they communicate by post or through the Internet. The reaction of the audience can be a nice **feedback**. Anyway pupils can give the feedback themselves under the guidance of the teacher.

When children are highly concentrated working on some item during theme-based teaching and they mutter for themselves in English, we have reached the aim: They are starting to think in English.

Theme-based teaching if it is done well is very demanding. Following are the **conditions** that must be fulfilled with successful theme-based teaching (see Cameron):

Careful choice of theme to involve all children;

Detailed planning, using brainstorming and webs;

Linking content with activities and discourse types;

Pre-planned organisation of materials and activities;

Teacher and class together deciding on 'guiding questions' that structure activities;

Building in 'choice points' where children are guided in making decisions over direction, activity or timing;

Management of classroom activity and use of resources;

Attention to amount and type of language use during activities;

Regular monitoring of each child's involvement and success in activities and language use, by teacher and children themselves;

Use final products to motivate and involve all children.