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ABSTRACT
                Use of a theme- or topic-based curriculum to teach
English as a Second Language in a Japanese university is described.
Students are freshmen and sophomores. The thematic approach
accommodates the interests of the large number of teachers in the
program and encourages teacher development of instructional materials
while achieving some consistency across classes. Materials for the
theme-based curriculum may include authentic materials,
teacher-developed resource kits, and commercially-produced materials
adapted by the teacher for the theme. Guidelines and suggestions are
offered for gathering and adapting these resources for classroom use.
A sample lesson plan using the communicative methodology and class
activities to develop all language skills (listening, reading,
speaking, writing) is presented; the theme is international cuisine.
Specific materials and individual and small-group exercises are
outlined. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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USING A
THEME-BASED CURRICULUM
TO TEACH ENGLISH

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3,800 words

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2

I. Types of Curricular Design

English language classes are typically organized around three different principles or upon a combination of these. Traditionally, language classes have been taught according to grammatical structures, and more recently, according to communicative functions of the language in everyday situations. English lessons might progress from the explanation, and use of grammatical structures such as the present, past, and future tenses to the past, present, and future perfect tenses. In terms of communicative functions, language lessons might introduce the language used in meeting people and in making self-introductions, and in asking directions. Classroom activities would involve students in listening to dialogues employing these different language functions, and in participating in role plays where they would produce this language.

The newest method of organizing English language classes is to structure them upon content. In this case, students for whom English is a second language, learn English through the study of a particular content area of knowledge. These students may be immigrants employed in a factory in an English-speaking country learning the English appropriate to their work. They may be college students with a native language other than English who are making the transition from studying English to using it as their medium of instruction. Typically, the latter group are students taking an introductory liberal arts class such as Psychology or History in a sheltered or adjunct course.

In terms of communicative methodology, the materials may have been adapted especially for the students, and the students may be getting language instruction as well. However, the students still have a central role in learning, in actively seeking their own learning strategies. They are encouraged to identify and apply learning strategies in all the language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

I.(a) A Theme-Based Curriculum
The third method of developing an English language class, perhaps the one with the greatest potential for creating interest among both teachers and students is the theme-based curriculum, one based upon themes or topics. The focus in this kind of course might be on developing students' cultural knowledge about another country, or about cross-cultural values around the world. Alternately, the course might be about such themes as foreign films, family relationships, childhood, or international cuisine, the unit on food described in this paper. In this type of curriculum, a communicative approach in the classroom emphasizes creating situations and role plays where the language can be learned through use.

A theme-based curriculum is used in the Integrated English program of the English Department of Aoyama Gakuin University. There are about 400 freshmen and an equal number of sophmores in the program. Students are placed in classes according to their performance on a departmental composition test and their scores on the CELT test. The latter is the Comprehensive English Language Test for learners of English, which measures knowledge of listening comprehension, language structure, and vocabulary (Harris and

Palmer, 1986).

The students take three different English classes which focus in turn on combined skills, and on listening, and writing. Each class is a half year in length and students progress through Levels One, Two and Three of each class. There are about 50 teachers in the program, both Japanese and native speakers of English, and most of these are parttime lecturers with their courses scheduled throughout the week.

The theme-based curriculum in the program accommodates the interests of different teachers and encourages them to develop classroom materials. Additional considerations of class content, and the coverage of similar language items, the uniformity of teacher objectives, the number of student assignments and their relative difficulty, different teaching styles, and even communication between teachers were all important factors in the decision to use a theme-based curriculum. Using a theme-based curriculum helps achieve some uniformity between classes in the program.

II. Materials for a Theme-based Curriculum

There are several different approaches to developing materials for a theme-based curriculum. In Content-Based Second Language Instruction, Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) describe them. Theme-based programs might use a combination of authentic materials, written and produced in English for speakers of that language (rather than for students of the language), resource kits that teachers have collected and developed for a theme, and commercially-produced language teaching materials adapted by teachers for the theme they are using in their classes.

Authentic materials are easily acquired. Melvin and Stout (1987) list print media materials such as street maps, transportation schedules, lists of hotels and businesses, brochures, television guides, advertisements, catalogues, even currency (p.45). Audio and video materials consist of radio and television programs, songs, and feature movies. The most important considerations with the use of authentic materials are their interest level for students and their suitability to a theme.

Using authentic materials successfully depends on choosing materials appropriate for the ability of the students and on developing good exercises to further student comprehension of the materials. One effective method of using print materials is to collage different print styles and type sizes together (Melvin and Stout, 1987). Students might read several different employment and help wanted ads and then read an article that dealt with choosing a career. With audio and video materials, students need to be able to listen to these several times in order to listen for specific details. Ideally, the kinds of activities teachers design for the materials should move from comprehension activities to such production activities as making presentations to the class, or writing reports, creating a class anthology of stories, or even publishing a newspaper.

Even when teaching English as a foreign language, there are many sources of authentic materials. In Japan, there are several English language newspapers, The Japan Times, The Daily Yomiuri, The Asahi Evening News, Mainichi Daily News, and popular English magazines such as Tokyo Journal. In Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe, there are many embassies and consular offices offering a wide variety of brochures, consumer and trade magazines, and other print media. Radio networks include the American armed forces network, the BBC World Service, and CBC Radio International. Several of these networks have programs such as National Public Radio that even offer program tapes and transcripts for a nominal fee. NHK offers television programming in English as well. Commercial videos are available of English television networks, too.

Resource kits are simply collections of materials that different teachers have found useful with a given theme. They may comprise readings, newspaper clippings, lesson plans, information gaps, games, role plays, and simulations. In an English program with a number of different teachers working on the same theme, formal mechanisms should be created in order to share materials. One approach is to display successful lesson plans and materials on a department noticeboard so that other teachers can read them, and possibly make copies of them. Furthermore, teachers in the program can contribute their best ideas to a resource binder available for easy reference.

In the case of the Integrated English program, there are also meetings throughout the academic year where teachers can share their ideas. Additionally, there is an annual inservice day at the beginning of the academic year. Teachers work together in small groups on curricular issues and there is also a teacher panel where instructors contribute some of their best ideas and explain how they use them in class. The meetings and inservice day are periodically summarized in bulletins distributed to teachers, and new ideas and lesson plans appear in subsequent editions of the program curriculum guide and its appendix of activities.

III. Commercially-produced Materials

The use of commercially-produced language-teaching materials such as textbooks, audiotapes, and videotapes depends on the nature of the program, its goals, the numbers of teachers and students involved, and the relative importance of coordination between them. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) identify several additional factors in the decision-making process of using these materials when designing a curriculum. They also caution that the course should not become material-driven. The factors they list are as follows:

> 1. Does the language curriculum focus on skills which might
>   be best taught by the use of commercial materials?
>
> 2. Would the use of a commercial textbook give the course
>   more face validity for students?

3. Would the use of a commercial textbook help alleviate the burden of material development for teachers?

4. Are commercially-produced textbooks available which contain passages such as readings from the content area of the course?

(Adapted from Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989, p.92)

In the case of the Integrated English program, the decision to use some commercially-produced materials was based on these reasons. At Integrated English, Level One, and Level Two, the program incorporates units from the language-teaching text by Jack Richards, Jonathan Hull, and Susan Proctor Interchange 2 (1991) for classroom speaking and discussion activities. The themes for Level One are (1)Memories, (2)Neighbours, (3)Urban life, (4)International Cuisine, (5)Travel. In Level Two, the themes are (1)Changing Times, (2)Evolution of The Workplace, (3)Geography, (4)Biography. At Level Three, the companion text by Jack Richards, Jonathan Hull, and Susan Proctor Interchange 3 (1991) is not a classroom text for the teachers in the program, but a sourcebook of ideas for the themes of (1)Relationships, (2)Tourism, (3)Environment, (4)The Media.

Thematically-related readings for all three levels are found in the ESL/EFL reading text by Brenda Wegmann, Miki Prijic Knezevic Mosaic I (1990). This text offers varied genres of reading, from short timed readings, poems, cartoons, charts and diagrams, newspaper and journal extracts, and capsule biographies to essays, and short stories. The readings are graded into three levels of difficulty, and most readings have pre-reading and vocabulary activities as well as other extension activities.

In addition, students in the Integrated English program are required to read two novels from a selection of more than 1,000 books that have been selected for the program. These include graded readers with controlled vocabularies, high-interest books related to popular television programs and films such as Jennifer Lynch (1990) The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer and Michael Black (1991) Dances With Wolves, and classics such as Charles Dickens (1834) A Christmas Carol, and Robert Louis Stevenson (1883) Treasure Island. These self-access books have been set aside in the school library. Students choose those appropriate to their abilities and interests.

There were several reasons for the inclusion of commercial materials such as these language-teaching texts, and ESL/EFL readers in the Integrated English program. One reason was to reduce teachers' planning time so that they could concentrate upon responding to students' work such as to their students' journals, and book reports, and to activities that students did outside of class time. Secondly, using commercial materials ensured both that certain reading skills were taught in classes and that an appropriate choice of readings, and activities were used. In this case, the texts helped create more uniformity between classes even though a number of instructors in the program had little experience in the teaching of reading.

Furthermore, readings and other activities drawn from the texts could be easily and regularly assigned to students as homework. This latter consideration is very important in a university language teaching program operating within the typical constraints of a university timetable.

In the case of the Integrated English program, students take one Integrated English core class of combined skills, 180 minutes in length, one time per week, meeting about 14 times over a semester. They also take one class in listening, and one in writing, 90 minutes each. The class sizes of about 23 students in the combined skills and writing classes are small compared to English language classes in many other Japanese colleges and universities. However, although the classes are smaller and meet more frequently than elsewhere, the contact hours are still too limited for students to make significant progress in language learning over a semester. The only recourse for language teachers is to assign students extra work in the form of self-access reading, and book reports, journal writing, and group presentations.

IV. A Sample Lesson Plan

The following lesson uses a communicative methodology integrating the four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. These are integrated into an approach whereby the teacher tries to create a classroom environment with settings in which the language learner might find himself or herself one day (Ellis, 1982). Accordingly, this means that the focus of classroom activities is on the message, not the form of the language so that students are concerned with what they say, not with how they express it.

Frequently, classroom activities will involve an information gap where one speaker does not know what the other will say. Student interactions are not pre-determined scripts, but negotiated, or altered through interactions (Ellis, p.75). The teacher doesn't provide lectures or information on the language, but feedback on student performance instead, through repetitions, expansions, extensions, prompting, and modelling of the language (Ellis, Ibid).

As well, each lesson in the core class of combined skills is supposed to help students develop learning strategies such as brainstorming, mapping, word clustering, listing vocabulary, and talk-write (dictating ideas to a partner) and relating personal experiences to a text. In listening, students are taught strategies suitable for conversations, reports, and lectures. While in reading, students learn strategies suitable for understanding different texts such as newspapers, magazines, stories, and essays. Finally, the skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing are also integrated in that the same theme and sometimes even the same context is carried from listening to reading to speaking to writing activities.

SAMPLE IE UNIT: IE Level I: Unit 4: International Cuisine	
Pre-writing **Writing**	1. At random, students choose pictures of food that the teacher has clipped from consumer magazines, and labelled. On the board, the teacher lists students' suggestions on how they would classify them (ie., colour, shape, texture, size, taste, price). 2. In different small groups, students brainstorm the appropriate vocabulary for one of the categories (ie., texture: rough, soft, hairy, smooth, hard, spongy, pitted, lined, grainy, feathery). 3. New groups are formed by the teacher that include one member from each of the previous groups. Members of these new groups share the descriptive vocabulary they developed in their previous groups. 4. Afterward, one member of each of the previous groups reports to the class on their vocabulary lists. Alternately, all the members of one of the new groups report on the vocabulary for each category. 5. The students write descriptions of their pictures using the classification and vocabulary.
Speaking	6. Information Gap - The teacher lists on the board all the different foods in the pictures the students chose. The teacher leads the class in brainstorming the questions: ie., What kind of food do you have? What colour is it? What kind of texture does it have? Afterward, students work in pairs and attempt to guess one another's food or dish through listening to their partner read a description of it. They change partners several times.

	7. The teacher asks students to write down a favourite food as well as one they dislike most. The teacher leads the class in brainstorming the appropriate language and also idiomatic phrases that might be used such as "I can't stand...", "I hate...", or "I detest..." Afterward, students in pairs ask one another which foods they like and dislike.
Pre-listening	8. Students prepare to listen to a tape (<u>Interchange 2</u>, Unit 4, Exercise 2) of a couple ordering a meal in a restaurant. Before they listen to the tape, the teacher draws their attention to a potential listening strategy of selective listening. Together, the teacher and the class discuss what kinds of things they could listen for such as the items ordered from the menu, the tenses used in the speakers' conversation, the speakers' attitudes to their orders.
Listening	
	9. Then the teacher asks a group of students to listen for each one of these items. The teacher plays the tape several times, allowing for group discussions following each playing.
	10. Afterward, the teacher asks a member of each group to report on their group's findings. The teacher plays the tape a final time so that students can confirm these observations. Lastly, the teacher draws students' attention to the transcript of the dialogue in <u>Interchange 2</u>, (p.22).

Speaking	11. Role P!ay - The previous listening activity now forms the basis of a role play between pairs of students. The two students use the vocabulary developed earlier in the unit for names of foods. Each pair is supposed to order food they like and food they dislike and explain their preferences in their conversation. The students are asked to improvise their conversations and to avoid writing. scripts and reading them. 12. The teacher monitors the role plays in the class and offers feedback. Then the role plays are re-enacted before the rest of the class.

	13. The teacher writes on the blackboard the idiomatic phrase "Last night Maurice ate food that disagreed with him." The students are asked to paraphrase it in their own words, then compare their answers before looking at the cartoon in their <u>Mosaic I</u> text, (p.72). and discussing it as a class.
Pre-Reading	14. Next, small groups of students categorize foods as healthy or unhealthy and present their lists to the class. These predictions about the content of the article are recorded on the board by the teacher.
	15. Students are asked to carefully preview the matching questions (p.70) for "Healthy Diets From Around the World" part of the article, (p.69), then scan to find the answers within 4 or 5 minutes. Afterward, students compare their answers.
Reading	16. Students are asked to skim the first few paragraphs in the article "Eat Like a Peasant, Feel Like a King," (<u>Mosaic</u>, p.64) to explain the title. Next, students review the class list they of healthy and unhealthy foods that they suppose will be mentioned in the article. They do a preliminary reading of the article to confirm or correct their predictions.
	17. Finally, they do the vocabulary context exercises in the text (pp. 64, 65) and check their answers with a partner. As homework, the teacher assigns the extension activities following the reading (pp. 79, 71, 72) and asks the students to reread the article again and make a written summary of it. These will form the basis of a group presentation in the following class.

	18. To end the unit, students in small groups might be asked to re-read the article to list different countries and their respective foods. These lists would form the basis of a menu for an ethnic restaurant. Each group would design a menu, complete with pictures and descriptions of foods, and then present it to class, noting the healthy, and unhealthy foods.
Consolidation	19. Alternately, small groups of students could develop survey questions about eating habits and use these as a basis for interviews to be conducted outside of class. Afterward, they would present the results of their surveys to the class.

V. Summary and Conclusion

The sequence of this short unit on food begins with a pre-writing activity. Students choose and examine pictures of food and then join the teacher in generating a classification to describe different types of food. At this point, the teacher could draw the material together by using a key visual such as a chart on the blackboard or OHP to list the different categories. Once the categories have been listed on the chart, students in groups use them to generate related vocabulary words. These are also added to the chart and form the basis for a writing activity where they described their pictures.

In turn, the descriptions of the pictures are used for an information gap speaking activity. The game-like nature of this activity is exciting for students and aids in their recall of vocabulary. The activity which is to be repeated with different partners aids recall through repetition.

Next, the teacher moves into a listening activity about a restaurant order. Initially, in the pre-listening phase, the teacher elicits some of the language students will be hearing on the tape. The listening strategy of selective listening is introduced to the students who employ it in listening to the conversation. Afterward, the conversation the students have heard becomes the basis of a role play speaking activity.

Finally, the teacher moves into a reading activity. The teacher starts by introducing a food-related cartoon, and by leading the students in making predictions about the article. Students engage in scanning, and then in skimming the article. After each, they confirm their success in using these strategies by checking their answers with other students. For homework, and subsequent class review, the students are assigned various extension activities from the text, and a project to consolidate the vocabulary and other types of knowledge they have gained from the unit.

In conclusion, using a theme-based curriculum to teach English is an excellent way to move beyond traditional grammar-based exercises and into more communicative activities. Themes can be highly-motivating for both teachers and students. Teachers can generate a wealth of materials and students can learn a language through attention to meaning rather than preoccupation with form.

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VII. Appendix:

Conversation 1

Woman: Hey, this sounds great -- snail with garlic. Have you eaten snails?

Man: No, I haven't.

Woman: Oh, they're delicious. I had them last time. Like to try some?

Man: No, thanks. They sound strange.

Waitress: Have you decided on an appetizer yet?

Woman: Yes, I'll have the snails.

Waitress: And you, sir?

Man: I'll have the fried brains.

Woman: Fried brains? Now that sounds strange!

(Interchange 2, p.22)