

Rosa Isabel Chavarría
Universidad Nacional (Heredia, Costa Rica)

**IMPROVING THE CURRICULUM
THROUGH A UNIFIED CONTENT AREA-BASED
APPROACH**

LETRAS 29-30 (1994)

This article is part of a complete research study on the topic carried out by the author at Indiana University (Pennsylvania) under the title Improving the EFL Curriculum through a Unified Content Area-Based Approach: The Case of Bilingual (English-Spanish) Secondary Schools in Costa Rica. Due to space restrictions, much valuable information has not been included here (e.g., literature review, theoretical framework, and instructional strategies).

Introduction

The *FL* (Foreign Language) learning process requires the use of appropriate instructional techniques and strategies to keep the it as natural as possible. The question of how to provide formal foreign language instruction with natural settings, meaningful contexts, and «comprehensible input»,¹ which facilitate the acquisition of the target language through its actual use, has been the concern of researchers, theorists and practitioners in the field.

The principles of curriculum design and the natural processes of learning and language, consistent with the Whole Language Approach, the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, and the Communicative Approach, have been analyzed. Assumptions and principles governing the Learning Process, the Language Process, and Curriculum Planning and Design relevant to the proposed theoretical framework were also analyzed. Specific bibliographic

1. S. D. Krashen, *The Input Hypothesis*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985.

material on the systematic integration of the content areas in the EFL class was not found; therefore, it was not possible to support or enrich this work with reported past experiences with this particular topic.

The bibliography consulted can be organized into the following three categories:

1. *Learning Process*: This category focuses on the definition of «meaningful learning» and «background cognition and knowledge,» which are considered key concepts in this work. Literature reviewed in this category includes Dewey (1933), Goodman et al. (1987), Guilles et al. (1988), Harste et al. (1988), and Stones (1979).
2. *Language Process*: This category focuses on linguistic concerns and is divided into three large subcategories: Theoretical Assumptions, Instructional Guidelines, Strategic Instruction. Each subcategory contains material relevant to each of the three approaches: The Whole Language Approach, The Input Hypothesis, and the Communicative Approach. Literature reviewed in this category includes Bean and Bouffler (1987), Calkins (1986), Goodman (1986) and (1987), Harste et al. (1988) and (1988), Krashen (1982), Mickelson and Davis (1987), O'Malley et al. (1985), Oxford (1985), (1989) and (1990), Rubin (1985) and (1975) Smith (1988).
3. *Curriculum and Course Design*: This category refers to relevant arguments on curriculum design, which are organized in the following subcategories: Assumption, Strategies to Curriculum Design, Evaluation. Literature reviewed in this category includes Goodman et al. (1986) and (1987), Guilles et al. (1988), Harste et al. (1988) Mickelson and Davis (1987), Woodley (1988).

The literature examined here points to the fact that cognitive and linguistic development are inextricably connected with dependencies in both directions: language is used to learn; and learning, in turn, fosters linguistic development. Language can not be taught directly, but rather develops embedded in the learning process and through its meaningful use

as the medium of learning and expression of thought. Research also examines the characteristics of natural learning, as opposed to formal instruction, and indicates a need for instructional strategies to provide a meaningful learning environment in formal instruction consistent with the principles of natural learning. Finally, the literature reviewed emphasizes the need to build a language and thought-centered curriculum which, through strategic instruction, addresses the principles of the interdependent relationship between the learning and the language processes.

The Study Problem

The present study intends to improve the EFL curriculum through a unified content area-based approach. More specifically, it was asked whether it was possible to design a curriculum that could keep the processes of language and learning as natural as possible. As Goodman (1986) states: «language has a natural purpose-communication,» and «literacy develops in response to personal and social needs.»

In this study it was assumed that the content areas provide the meaningful and comprehensible input necessary for language use and language development in meaningful contexts, where cognitive and linguistic abilities develop in a dynamic relationship. This approach allows a curriculum that tailors instruction to resemble natural learning situations, where language learning occurs subconsciously, through its actual use in situations which motivate a real need to generate and to communicate meaning. Intensive reading experiences are the key to generating the new literacy knowledge.

The improved curriculum is organized within a framework of transactions based on the three phases of knowing —perceiving, ideating, and presenting— along with appropriate pedagogical strategies for each phase.

The Proposal

The unified content area-based instructional approach is proposed here as an alternative for the improvement of an EFL (English as a Foreign

Language) curriculum involving the four language skills. The resulting curriculum is intended to be used as a general school-year plan, and as a substitute for a textbook-centered EFL curriculum. The curriculum proposed suggests a unified approach to EFL, in which linguistic and cognitive abilities grow within a dynamic relationship.

The content area-based instructional approach centers on a holistic understanding of knowledge, and focuses on the use of thematic units to organize instruction. Thematic units provide the comprehensible input (new knowledge that fits with the learners' background) for learning and communication, in the form of intensive reading, and verbal interaction and written reaction resulting from reading. The study units are the possible discipline content-area perspectives of the new learning situation. The learners delimit and focus on their topic according to the discipline area perspective of their choice. The topics are worked out as cooperative research projects. The results of the learners' research are presented in the form of written and oral reports. Language skills are constantly reinforced in context, through intensive reading, reactive writing, verbal sharing and reaction, as well as directed and insightful listening. A schematic representation of the approach proposed can be seen in Figure 1.

The integration of knowledge takes place as the result of a collaborative exchange of ideas and points of view throughout the learning process, and allows the learners to participate with different perspectives (provided by the content-area focus) and different alternative solutions to the same problem. The concept of pollution (thematic unit), for example, can be studied from chemical, ecological, biological, social, and historical perspectives (possible study units).

Building the Curriculum

The following steps are proposed for curriculum design:

- The establishment of a general aim drawn from the guiding theoretical and instructional principles and beliefs (the rest of the curriculum is designed towards the achievement of this aim).

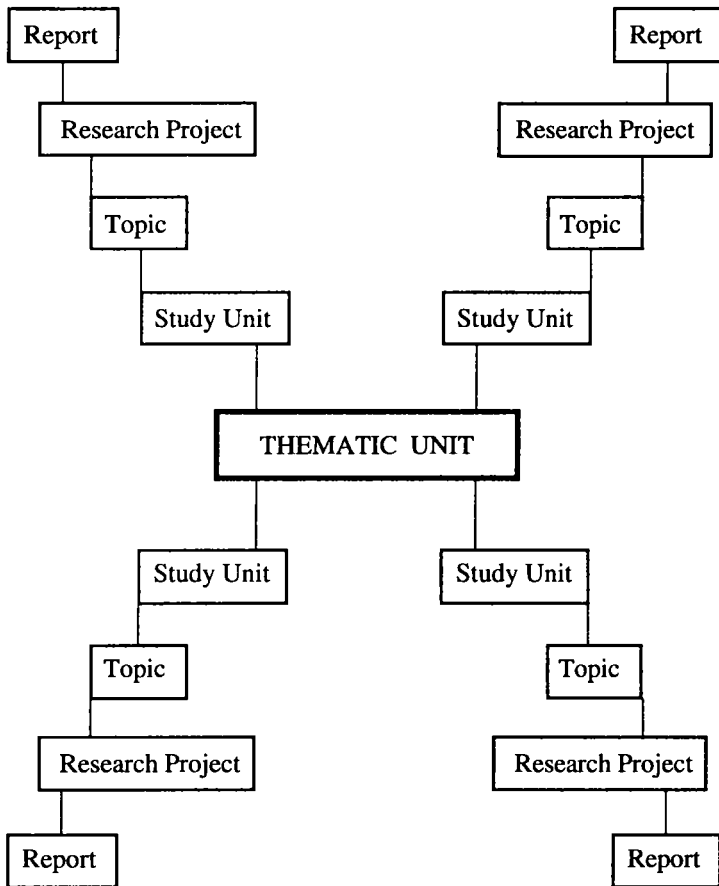


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the Unified Content Area-Based Instructional Approach.

- The selection of thematic units which constitute the main organization of instruction within the curriculum, and provide the basic comprehensible input for the learners' intellectual development in the process of knowing.

- The setting of educational objectives and pedagogical strategies, consistent with the principles of the unified content area-based approach, and which are organized within a framework of transactions based on the phases of knowing-perceiving, ideating, and presenting (Goodman et al., 1987).

Figure 2 represents the schematic organization of the curriculum:

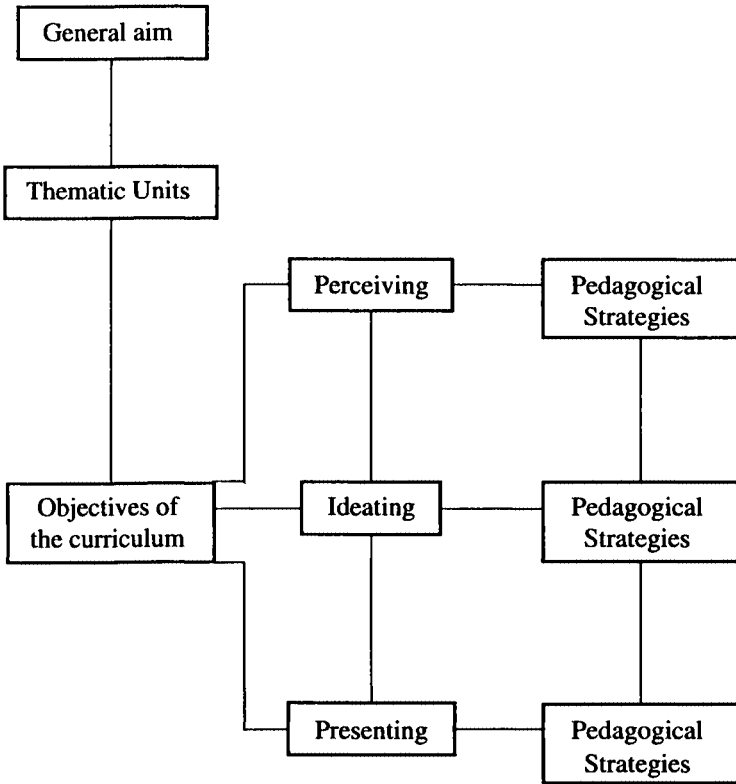


Figure 2. Schematic organization of the curriculum proposed.

General Aim

The *general aim* must:

- be consistent with the goals of education and the theoretical principles of the learning and the language processes that better fulfill the needs of the learners;
- address the principle of knowledge integration.

The following is proposed as the general aim of this EFL curriculum:

Enable the learners to develop their ability to read, discuss, and write about complex and abstract ideas concerning significant problems related to social, cultural, and scientific development.

This general aim covers the following main aspects of the learning and language processes:

- The use of language as the medium of communication (expression alludes to any or all forms of language);
- The social nature of learning (the learners are prepared to express themselves in order to learn);
- The relationship between language and thought (language is used to express thought, ideas);
- The factor of relevance (significant problems) in the learning process;
- Meaningful learning as a problem solving process;
- The unified holistic nature of knowledge through the integration of the content areas;
- The active and responsible role of learners in their own learning process (the learners express their ideas);

- The role of the teacher as a facilitator (the teacher assists the learner), rather than acting authority.

The achievement of the general aim results from the accomplishment of the different stages of the curriculum.

Thematic Units

Thematic units are broad themes which constitute the key to a unified approach to EFL, and the main organization of the curriculum throughout the school year. These broad themes emerge at an early stage of the process as the result of the cooperative work of the EFL teacher and other content-area specialists. These thematic units are later enriched by the thoughtful and active participation of the learners, who contribute through revising, improving, or changing (in agreement with the EFL teacher) the themes set by the teacher, and by choosing the focused topics on which thematic units draw.

From the beginning of the school year, the learners must know what thematic units will be covered, what the learning expectations are (expected outcomes of the learning process in terms of the learner), and what the teacher's expectations are (what the teacher expects from them). This allows an analysis of the curriculum, group discussion, and eventual negotiation between teacher and learners before the learning process starts.

Procedure

- Getting ready

Before designating the thematic units the EFL teacher must do preliminary bibliographic research and consult with other content-area specialists about possible thematic units. The teacher should plan in advance a tentative distribution of time within the school year to allow for the setting of the thematic units on a real time basis. It is recommended that time for required evaluation be allocated first. The time left must be divided into periods of two weeks each to work on the thematic units. This gives the learners time for reflecting, reacting, demonstrating, and applying the new

knowledge, and at the same time allows the teacher to organize the material and plan the learning activities for the following thematic unit, while the learners are engaged in their research projects. The EFL teacher should request cooperation from content-area specialists on the basis of the theoretical beliefs and instructional implications.

Getting started

- Setting the list of thematic units

Based on the preliminary bibliographic research and the suggestions provided by the content-area specialists, the EFL teacher should prepare the list of thematic units, which must be relevant to the learners, broad enough as to allow interdisciplinary study, and supported by sufficient information (printed material and other sources) in different disciplines. The teacher must make certain that the themes can be logically expanded, and studied practically in the school setting.

Consider the following example of thematic units and possible focused topics:

Culture, Language, and Communication

- U.S. television programs in Costa Rica and the development of cultural stereotypes relative the foreign culture;*
- The impact of popular teenagers' magazines from the U.S. in our culture, e.g., a cross-cultural comparison of sex roles, cultural stereotypes;*
- The impact of rock music, e.g., effects on our society, effects on our language.*

- Gathering and selecting the material

Once the thematic units are established, content-area specialists must be encouraged to participate providing and suggesting a wide variety of material (printed matter and other material) that approach the thematic units from alternative disciplines. The material selected should be relevant and

interesting to the learners; it must be new, although related to their cognitive background knowledge. The selections should be comprehensible in the sense that they must have a wide range of readability. This means that the reading matter needs to be complete in itself, and well and clearly written. Realia can be used to make the reading more real and enhance comprehension. Each thematic unit should contain a solid core of authentic reading material, as well as other kinds of material like films, artifacts, pictures, to encourage critical reading, group discussion, and thoughtful involvement.

The material selected must be broad enough to allow an analysis of the problem from any of the disciplines or specific content areas; be appropriate to their linguistic level to assure comprehension and foster the acquisition of new language. Material in which the language level is too far beyond the learners' linguistic ability is more likely to remain meaningless and out of their comprehensible reach, even if the learners have the appropriate cognitive background knowledge. On the other hand, reading material which does not provide any linguistic challenge to the learners is not effective for the improvement of their linguistic ability.

The EFL teacher must open a file for each thematic unit, to contain the material gathered for the study units and a record of other available resources, as well as future insights, experiences, and recommendations that emerge during the process.

The Study Units

The study units are the possible discipline areas from which the thematic units can be studied. These units constitute the interdisciplinary instructional organization of the new learning situation. Each study unit provides a specific discipline area perspective of the same thematic unit; the perspectives are strategically reintegrated through group sharing, fostering the interdisciplinary focus of the curriculum.

Recommendations to the teacher:

At the beginning of this stage, provide examples of possible study units and detailed focus topics (see the section above on Thematic Units) to enhance the learner's comprehension of the new learning situation.

The learners must take responsibility for the building of their own study units on the basis of their needs and interests. The study units must allow for study groups of not more than three members each.

These units must be developed by organizing the material provided by both the teacher and the learners into various disciplines and thereafter into units.

Objectives of the curriculum

«Without words as vehicles...no cumulative growth of intelligence could occur. Experience might form habits of physical adaptation but it would not teach anything; for we should not be able to use old experience consciously to anticipate and regulate new experience.»
(John Dewey, 1933)

It is the task of the EFL teacher to define the curriculum objectives, consistent with the theoretical and instructional principles that support the curriculum. Therefore, the objectives of the curriculum are selected to express the natural, unbreakable, and dynamic relationship between language development and intellectual development, within the restrictions of the classroom setting. The objectives derive from three focal concerns: 1) Developing a learning attitude; 2) learning through language and thinking; and 3) developing language and thinking. Objectives are suggested for each of the three focal concerns; however, the EFL teacher should outline these objectives, and create new ones if necessary, aiming to cover the specific learning situation together with the learners' needs and interests.

1. Developing a learning attitude

Natural learning has an inherent stimulus provided by the environment. This stimulus is developed by the fact that natural learning is determined by the learners' experiences, their interests, and needs. Natural learning is purposeful; the learners learn what they want and when they need to. However, the classroom situation lacks that natural and inherent stimulus. For this reason, the curriculum must aim to develop a learning attitude in the learners.

- *Active and responsible participation.* The learners must be encouraged to make decisions in regard to the curriculum on the basis of their own needs and interests. They must have the opportunity not only to be familiar with the curriculum, but also to analyze and discuss it, before and during the learning process, and suggest improvements and/or changes in the light of their own interests and needs. The curriculum must provide the learners with opportunities to make choices which foster responsible decision making. The learners must be encouraged to determine their own learning needs and interests, and transfer them into the learning process in the form of decisions.
- *Awareness of the learning process.* The curriculum must stimulate the learners' awareness of their own learning processes. This means self-awareness of their learning styles, preferences, and strategies, allowing the learners' conscious control and monitoring of their own learning process and manipulation of the learning material.
- *Responsibility for their own learning.* Due to the fact that the curriculum emphasizes the learners' active participation and decision making, it is required that the learners be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. Intelligent and reliable decisions can be made only if the learners are aware of, and consciously accept, their responsible role in the learning process. This, in turn, implies giving the teacher the role of resource rather than authority.
- *Risk-taking.* The curriculum must make certain to provide a low anxiety learning environment that can foster risk-taking on the part of the learner. Risk-taking implies being willing to make educated guesses, anticipate, and make predictions about the new knowledge. Various learning situations must be provided to encourage the learners to use the new knowledge, as well as to transfer this knowledge to other similar learning situations.

2. Learning through Language and Thinking

The curriculum seeks to provide the learners with meaningful learning experiences, where learning is mediated by language, and language and

thought take place in the process of comprehension of new knowledge. Meaningful learning implies enabling the learners to think about the new knowledge, talk about it, identify problems, write about them, and provide solutions. As Goodman et al. (1987) point out, without language no cumulative growth of intelligence could take place; therefore, experience would be worthless.

- *Building new knowledge on past experience.* To be consistent with the natural learning process, learning occurs when the learners are able to identify familiar features from their past experience in the new knowledge. Therefore, the curriculum must encourage the learners' conscious use of their background experience (cognitive and linguistic) to make sense of the new learning situation.
- *Learning as problem solving.* Meaningful learning, as opposed to rote learning, is problem solving. The curriculum must foster the learners' ability to learn about reality and carry out changes to adjust reality to their needs and interests. This means that they should face the new learning situation, identify problems, and apply methods of approaching, analyzing, and solving the problem. The ability to solve problems is the skill of learning to learn. For this to take place, the curriculum must encourage the transfer and application of the problem solving ability to new learning situations.
- *Learning through language.* The curriculum is centered on an understanding of language, not as an object of study but as a medium to learning. Language must allow learners to face the new learning situation and decode it in familiar terms (meaning language) which, in turn, will allow the learners to manipulate their thoughts aiming towards comprehension. The use of language to access, and react to the new learning situation must be emphasized.
- *Social interaction and intellectual development.* The curriculum must foster the use of language as the medium of intellectual development through social interaction. It is necessary to provide continuous opportunities for the learners to have contact with new people and

experiences, to encourage the expansion and enrichment of their personal experience through insightful sharing and collaboration with others, and to be receptive to others' perspectives.

- *Integrating knowledge.* The curriculum must provide a holistic interpretation of knowledge. For this, interdisciplinary analyses of specific problems must be encouraged, as well as the subsequent relationship among the different perspectives or elements of reality.

3. Developing Language and Thinking

Language is the main concern of an EFL curriculum. However, this curriculum does not focus on language as an object of study, but rather on the development of language through its meaningful use as the medium through which intellectual development is achieved.

- *Developing language in context.* The curriculum must emphasize the expansion of language and thinking in the context of its functional use. Various disciplines, unified in the thematic units, provide the real contexts of language use within which the learners learn and communicate. This means, for example, that if the learners are studying history in the EFL class, they are actually learning and communicating history. The curriculum must emphasize the use of English to learn and communicate relevant problems related to any of the various disciplines rather than dissecting those disciplines and relevant topics for contemplation and study of the language. The learning of new forms of language and the expansion of the linguistic ability must be fostered through the real use of language within meaningful contexts.
- *Creating language for new learning.* New language must be the result of learning; the linguistic needs of the new learning situation are identified and language is developed when the present level of language does not suffice. The linguistic abilities must be challenged constantly by reading and listening material; new language must be internalized through immediate and continuous application.

- *Using language functionally and purposefully.* The functional use of language must be stimulated constantly. The curriculum must encourage the expression and support of personal ideas and the reaction to other's ideas and points of view, about significant problems related to any of the various disciplines. The need for critical and thoughtful reading of relevant material from the thematic units must be emphasized, as well as the reaction to reading by thoughtful, purposeful writing.
- *The social and communicative functions of language.* The learning environment must foster the social and communicative functions of language to enrich learning. It is necessary that communication and socialization be encouraged in the real context of the classroom and school setting. Within the learning process it is required that the learners expand their use of language to the social and communicative functions, through natural sharing with peers and teachers.

Once the objectives of the curriculum are established, the EFL teacher can define the pedagogical strategies required to deal with the objectives, and organize those strategies according to Goodman's (1987) three phases of knowing —perceiving, ideating, and presenting— explained below in the context of the proposed curriculum.

Perceiving

Perceiving, the first phase of knowing, is the learners' first contact with the new data from the environment. In the process of comprehending, the learners come in contact with the new knowledge, identify familiar features (from their background knowledge) in the new learning situation, and try to fit the new knowledge into their already existing schema. In this process of comprehending, the learners make use of verbal and non-verbal cues that help them enhance comprehension.

It is suggested that early in this phase the learners be informed of the learning objectives, work schedule, time expectations to accomplish the learning objectives, and description of the evaluation criteria² (specifying

2. The more clearly the learners understand the classroom rules, requirements, and expectations, the more effective their learning engagement will be (Marzano et al., 1987).

evaluation requirements of formal instruction) of the thematic unit. It is recommended that two full lessons be allocated for this perceiving phase, so that the learners can get acquainted with the new thematic units and the sample study units proposed by the teacher.

It is the task of the EFL teacher to create the environment to be perceived by the learners, and through which the sample study units are introduced. The study units must be clearly organized in the form of discipline area focused sets that integrate the sample material provided by the teacher. The curriculum suggests introducing the interdisciplinary study units in this stage, through instructional strategies that combine verbal and non-verbal cues; the combination of instructional strategies allows for their different learning styles. Following are general recommendations to the teacher on strategic instruction and, thereafter, various examples of combined pedagogical strategies.

Recommendations to the teacher on strategic instruction:

- Arouse the learners' curiosity towards the new learning situation through the strategic combination of cues, the use of relevant material, the possibility of a variety of perspectives of choice, and challenging questions.
- Encourage the learners to identify familiar features in the new knowledge from their background experience in order to enhance comprehension.
- Motivate the learners' imagination through open-ended informal conversation and thinking-out-loud interaction in which the learners face the new situation and say aloud what they think and feel about it; they predict and make guesses.
- Encourage the learners to suggest possible topics to focus on within each specific study unit.
- Enhance the learners' comprehension by combining verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, support the material with titles, labels, or phrases.

- Arouse the learners' feelings by having them talk about the shape, color, texture, and meanings of non-verbal cues (e.g., artifacts); stimulate their imagination by challenging guesses and predictions.

The following examples can be used by the teacher to illustrate a new learning situation through combined pedagogical strategies. The examples provide possible focused topics built on specific study units from a thematic unit.

Thematic Unit: Culture, Language and Communication

- «Developing cultural stereotypes about the U.S.»

Printed material such as comic strips and U.S. magazines that are popular in Costa Rica, as well as videotaped material like popular U.S. television shows and advertisements, can motivate the learners and support various readings on the analysis of mass media and cultural stereotypes.

Ideating

Ideating is the second phase of knowing and the stage of the learners' most active engagement in the learning process. This is when the learners ask questions about the experience; they talk about what has been perceived, transferring those perceptions from experience into their own symbols to fit their existing schemata and form personal concepts. The learners realize what they know about the theme and what else they need and want to know; they define their learning preferences and interests. The learners build hypotheses on the new knowledge on the basis of their perceptions, and try to find evidence to prove them. The learners read about and react to the new learning situation according to their own perspectives and they listen to others' (peers, teachers, books, etc.) view points. This insightful sharing influences the learners' personal concepts, reorganizes and expands their perceptions, and enhances their comprehension. This process fosters the learners' reconceptualization, verification or reconsideration of their hypotheses and determines further generalizations on the new knowledge.

The curriculum suggests that in the perceiving phase the learners form groups of interest on the basis of their choice of a particular study unit. These groups work cooperatively in the development of the research project. Uninterrupted reading, purposeful writing, and continuous sharing all play a crucial role in the curriculum, and must be part of the constant engagement of the interest groups. These groups constitute the main social organization of the classroom and foster a suitable setting where language develops more naturally towards its immediate and real use as a major medium to learning. One half of the time should be assigned for the thematic units to be allocated for the ideating phase to allow the learners to acquire a level of expertise in the particular study unit.

During this phase most of the learning takes place through group cooperation, thus, the importance of a setting which allows continuous group work. Trips to the library and outdoor meetings should constitute part of the learning setting during this phase.

Recommendations to the teacher on strategic instruction:

It is necessary to look for strategies that enable the learners' to make use of language for thinking purposes in a real world context, and develop their problem solving ability through strategic instruction which encourages the learners to do the following: a) identify and hypothesize about problems in the new learning situation; b) seek information to support hypotheses; c) analyze this information by discriminating between relevant and non-relevant information and by contrasting, comparing, and classifying it; d) use other alternative communication systems like drawing a graph or making a model, or look for a pattern to facilitate understanding the parts of the whole problem; e) synthesize the information by eliminating possibilities, making guesses, checking, refining, and transferring, looking for alternative solutions to the problem.

As part of strategic instruction, direct instruction on learning strategies is recommended. Learning strategies are general procedures, steps, actions, behaviors, or techniques used by the learners to enhance learning (Oxford, 1989) and achieve higher success rates, and can be applied to any area of the

knowledge domain. The main goal of direct strategy instruction is to help the learners develop an awareness of their own learning process. This implies enabling them to transfer knowledge to new learning situations, and to manipulate the learning material directly on the basis of their learning styles and needs.

The curriculum emphasizes the responsibility of the learners for their own learning process. However, for this responsibility to develop, the learners must have control of their learning process, and this, in turn, implies an awareness of their own learning preferences, styles, and needs. Direct strategy instruction allows the learners to take control of their own learning processes. This is necessary to enable them to make conscious and responsible decisions about their learning processes.³

Presenting

«Presenting is both the culmination of knowing and the beginning of it, for every presentation offers something new to be perceived and considered. The phases of knowing are thus cyclical.» (Goodman et al., 1987:121)

In the presenting phase, the learners are ready to show to the outside world what their resulting conceptions are, and test them against others' conceptions and notions through self-reflection and responses from others. The original conceptions are reorganized in the light of new perspectives resulting from others' reactions. The final and composite concepts and generalizations are encoded into language; conclusions are written down and the main ideas are summarized and presented in the form of oral and written reports.

In this phase, the learners are ready to test their hypotheses by applying their conceptions to the new learning situations and show others (peers and teacher) the results of this application. It is important to mention

3. For more information on learning strategies, see A. U. Chamot & L. Kupper (1989) and R. Oxford (1985).

that although the learners work cooperatively in groups, share a research project, and arrive at results jointly, the linguistic and cognitive development of the learners is individual and determined by specific factors, such as the learners' awareness of their own learning process, their individual conceptions, and their willingness to expand them and reconceptualize as the insightful result of testing their conceptions against those of others.

The curriculum suggests accepting both the individual growth and the social nature of learning as equally determinant in the learning process. The learners are responsible for presenting to their interest group their individual findings on a specific focused topic for consideration and group discussion. In light of the group response and the different views that emerge as the result of sharing perspectives, the learners reorganize their individual concepts and generalizations, and at the same time they build collaborative conceptions by establishing relationships between the different individual perspectives of the same problem.

Together the interest groups build their thematic unit-related research projects by pooling their individual findings and meshing their individual conceptions and generalizations. The learners arrive at conclusions, summarize their ideas, and use language to present their collaborative results through oral and written reports which makes use of various forms of expression and combines both linguistic and non-linguistic modes or strategies to stimulate the various senses.

For example, for a thematic unit on Technology and Society, in which the focused topic is «Social Problems in Costa Rica Associated with the Introduction of Technology,» an interest group may choose to combine the following strategies in the final report of their research project: a) a time line identifying the main occupations in San José during a specific period of time, pointing out the influence of technology; b) diagrams showing the migration of population from the country to the capital city due to technology; c) story books (or biographies) portraying the social effects of such migration, and illustrated with pictures; d) a written report for the learners' future reference summarizing the main ideas and providing conclusions and solutions to the problem; e) group discussion as a concluding activity which allows the interest group to listen to their peers' reactions to the ideas presented.

Recommendations to the teacher on strategic instruction to be applied during the presenting phase:

- Allocate time according to the number of presentations and distribute it among the groups in advance.
- Stimulate the learners' self-confidence by providing a respectful and relaxing learning atmosphere which encourages the learners' risk-taking during individual presentations within the interest groups as well as collaborative group presentations.
- Plan opportunities for the learners to practice presenting their conceptions in different language modes to encourage them to explore their own thinking and identify the most suitable modes according to their learning preferences (Goodman et al., 1987).
- Plan discussion sessions to stimulate the learners' acute listening and thoughtful speaking. During discussion conceptions are reconsidered, expanded, altered, and even abandoned in the light of new perspectives (Goodman et al., 1987). Make sure that discussion takes place within a respectful environment.
- Encourage the learners to integrate writing as a meaningful activity to support the learning process. Writing must be a useful and purposeful means of allowing the learners to organize their ideas and arrange their thoughts to enhance their presentations as well as to provide a record of knowledge for future reference.
- Show the learners how to use alternative media such as audiotape, videotape, xerography, and microcomputers. Encourage the learners to take advantage of them to extend their choice of strategies for presenting (Goodman et al., 1987).
- Arrange a summarizing group discussion after the presentations to stimulate the learners' reflective thinking (Goodman et al., 1987). A general group discussion also allows the learners to pull the different

conceptions together, establish relationships between the various perspectives presented around the same thematic unit, and organize them into a unified, although complex, interpretation of reality.

- Plan an evaluation session where the learners can look back and analyze their own learning process, noting what was effective and what was inefficient on the basis of their initial learning goals, questions, and issues (Harste et al., 1988).

The presentation of the final reports thus stimulates new responses, and the learners evaluate their learning process on the basis of those responses. The objectives of the curriculum are compared to the results of the evaluation of the learning process, and are changed, improved, or even—if necessary—used to fulfill the new needs of the learners. New issues and questions are raised for future consideration, new problems emerge for the learners to perceive, and a new cycle begins.

Conclusion

Learning is a natural process which comes from the learners' experience and is stimulated by the environment. Natural learning is determined by the learners' needs and interests; it is purposeful and becomes meaningful through its application. Current learning theories as well as language—first language and second language—approaches, agree on the need to build curriculum on the basis of the principles of natural learning.

An alternative unified content area-based approach to improve EFL curriculum design has been proposed here on the basis of the analysis of the learners' needs and interests. The curriculum fosters the learners' linguistic and intellectual development together, within a dynamic relationship. A theoretical framework, which integrates principles of learning theories as well as those of first and second language learning theories, supports the instructional application of the curriculum which is organized according to the three phases of knowing: perceiving, ideating, presenting. The recommendations provided on strategic instruction not only support the instructional process, but also are consistent with the theoretical principles of the curriculum.

Evidence presented in this research has shed light particularly on the following aspects of the unified content area-based approach to EFL curriculum design which facilitate the learners' linguistic development:

- The school setting is valued as one of the learners' main sources of experience and language use.
- Strategic instruction fosters the learners' conscious control over and responsibility for their own learning process.
- The social nature of language and learning is emphasized and maximized through a highly social interactive learning environment.
- The learners critical thinking ability is developed through insightful sharing of ideas and conceptions within a respectful learning atmosphere.
- The purpose of both learning and language is addressed through opportunities for immediate application of knowledge, in which the focus is on meaning generation rather than on correctness of language.
- The learners are provided with open possibilities of choice to fulfill their linguistic and cognitive needs and interests.
- Through the use of English for learning, learners develop language skills within meaningful contexts.

All these aspects together provide the optimal conditions for language development through its meaningful use as a medium of learning and expression of thought. The curriculum proposed requires the EFL teacher's awareness and understanding of the basic principles of first and second language learning, as well as the active collaboration of content area specialists, to also bring about active, relevant learning for our learners.

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