

Meeting 10-12 Year Olds' English
Language Learning Needs through a
Theme-based Approach

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Tomás: "How do you say 'pegada'?"

Teacher: "It's footprint"

Tomás: "In my book 'Físicoquímica' I have this picture."

(He's talking about the moon landing footprint)

Rita: "Nikki, why they put the capsule in ocean?"

Teacher: "Yes. Why did they put the capsule in the ocean? Can anybody say?"

The above conversation observed during an elementary level English class at the British Council Lisbon highlights the kind of communication going on in classrooms in the school where a theme-based approach to learning and teaching English is being followed with 10-12 year old learners (5th, 6th and 7th year school pupils). The conversation shows learners sharing their knowledge about the theme of Space and the video clip they have just watched of the 1969 moon landing. Additionally, the learners are trying to understand and find out more about it, drawing on any linguistic resources they have. The teacher has provided material and activities linked to a theme which is motivating for her learners and she is supporting and scaffolding their English learning. This paper discusses what a theme-based approach to learning and teaching English is, how themes can be used to plan and organise language learning with 10-12 year olds, problems that may arise with a theme-based approach and how such an approach supports 10-12 year olds' language learning.

This discussion of a theme-based approach draws on classroom observation, teaching and syllabus and materials development which has taken place in the context of the British Council in Lisbon. At the school, learners have English classes for three hours per week, supplementing

their statutory school English learning. The paper aims to show that a theme-based approach gets 10-12 year olds learning how to communicate in English in meaningful ways drawn from a variety of discourse areas and is adaptable to a statutory school English learning and teaching context. It is clearly important to clarify at this point what is meant by a theme-based approach to learning and teaching English and what the benefits of this approach are.

A theme-based approach has been described by Cameron as follows:

In theme-based teaching and learning many different activities are linked together by their content; the theme or topic runs through everything that happens in the classroom and acts as a connecting thread for pupils and teacher. (Cameron 189)

Cameron highlights how this approach structures language learning around a theme which links together a number of activities and tasks as a 'connecting thread' (189). One way of organising this approach to learning and teaching a language is to develop the theme through school subject areas relevant to the age group of the learners, e.g. art, maths, citizenship and science for 10-12 year olds. In this way, a theme-based approach involves learners carrying out activities and tasks using content and language from subjects across the curriculum and all tied to a theme. As Moon has it, "In the process, children are using English in a purposeful way to find out things and do things which have meaning and interest for them and to communicate the results to others" (Moon 119). Moon identifies one of the key benefits of this approach with 10-12 year old learners of English, which is that learners' knowledge and interests in all areas are taken into account through giving them purposeful tasks to do which have meaning for them (119). The importance of understanding and meaningful and purposeful communication to these 10-12 year olds' language learning will be returned to below.

Language outcomes are of central importance in this approach, a factor paralleled by the emergence of what Langé posits is a distinct European model of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in which overt work on language is incorporated (Langé). Met, a coordinator of Foreign Languages for Maryland County, USA, places all content based teaching

on a continuum between courses and classes which are content driven and language driven – see table 1:

CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONTINUUM OF CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATION				
Content-Driven			Language-Driven	
Total and Partial Immersion	Subject Courses Taught in L2	Subject Courses Plus Language Instruction	Language Classes Based on Themes	Language Classes with Frequent Use of Content for Practice
	Sheltered classes (Brinton, Snow & Wesche)	Adjunct model (Brinton, Snow & Wesche)	Theme-based courses (Brinton, Snow & Wesche)	Multi-disciplinary activities used to improve language proficiency
	Foreign language-enriched university courses (Jurasek, et al.)	English for Academic/Social Purposes, Business French	Thematic units Area studies (Leaver & Stryker)	Content-related FLES (Curtain & Pesola)
	LxC (Straight)	Content-enriched FLES (Curtain & Pesola)		
	Content-based FLES (Curtain Pesola)			

Table 1. A continuum of content driven and language driven courses (Met)

According to Met's classification, Language Classes Based on Themes are close to the language-driven end of the continuum. These are courses where the language teacher / level coordinator / school selects a theme from which language outcomes are derived. The theme-based approach currently being implemented with 10-12 year old learners in the British Council

in Lisbon (BC Lisbon) is included in this group, with courses which are theme-based and include language learning outcomes. For teachers working within a curriculum in which language items are fixed and pre-determined, one possibility would be experimenting by using a theme-based approach for one, two or three lessons, or for part of a lesson across a couple of weeks. This would come to the right of the table, as Language Classes with Frequent Use of Content for Practice (Met). The central importance of language outcomes in theme-based courses clearly puts them at the language-driven end of the continuum and is a key planning factor.

A theme-based approach can be used to plan and organise English language learning. Beginning with a theme which is developed through school subject areas to create tasks and activities and from which language learning outcomes are selected (Moon; Cameron). The following diagram shows a topic-web for the theme of Spies, a theme on our beginner level course for 10-12 year old learners at BC Lisbon.



Table 2. A topic web for the theme Spies at beginner level

The topic-web shows how the theme Spies is developed through school subject areas relevant to the age group of the learners (of course a theme may not cover all school subject areas). Next, tasks or activities that are devised in which, to return to Moon, "children are using English in a purposeful way to find out things and do things which have meaning and interest for them and to communicate the results" (Moon 19) – see Tables 3, 4 and 5:

Theme	Spies
School subject area	Maths
Task	Read and write messages using secret codes
Language outcomes	Reading and writing basic messages Consolidation of alphabet and numbers 1-30 Lexis related to codes

Theme	Spies
School subject area	Stories
Task	Read and view story Spycat (BC Learn English website) Write a story based on your own spy character
Language outcomes	Reading and writing a simple story Lexis related to spies Present simple and continuous tenses

Theme	Spies
School subject area	Citizenship
Task	Find out about the CIA K-9 Corps (spy dogs) Information swap
Language outcomes	Reading from a website Language of biographical information Lexis related to CIA dogs Process language

Tables 3, 4 and 5. Planning and organising language learning from themes

When planning a theme-based course or sequence of lessons, some language outcomes that the specific activities or tasks within a theme will lead to can be identified. At the syllabus or course planning stage, as Willis and Willis suggest in their model of a lexical syllabus, texts which have been selected need to be analysed for relevant language coverage and activities designed to focus on form (Willis and Willis 79). The target language selected must take learners' level, and the corresponding cognitive load that they can cope with, into account. However, as Met points out, "Some of the language that emerges from content learning will be high frequency, useful language outside the content classroom; some of it may not be" (Met). Language learning from themes and their development through school subjects relevant to 10-12 year olds demands the inclusion of content-specific language. Table 6 shows examples of language outcomes from theme-based courses for 10-12 year olds at BC Lisbon:

Theme and level	School subject through which it is developed	Task/activity	Language outcomes: lexis
Spies beginner	Citizenship	Read about CIA K-9 corps (from CIA website for kids)	a strong sense of smell, find explosives, trained to catch bad guys
Space elementary	Technology	Design an invention for an astronaut	an astronaut, the International Space Station, zero gravity, things float about
Up In The Sky Pre-intermediate	Science	Learn about wings, flying and birds	a bird's wing, an airplane's wing, flap its wings, airfoil, lift
Advertising intermediate	Technology/ Media Literacy	Design an advert for ice-cream	a catchy slogan, the advert is aimed at, to appeal to someone, hidden persuaders

Table 6. Language outcomes from themes

Certain themes clearly lend themselves to structural language outcomes, e.g. Adventures In The Past; the past simple tense or Space; zero conditionals. Themes selected are required to

both motivate the majority of 10-12 year olds in the learning context and further language learning goals.

As Met argues, in a theme-based approach "Language is used to explore content, and language growth emerges as students need to comprehend or produce language related to content" (Met). The following conversation between a teacher and learners observed in a BC Lisbon classroom provides examples of this emerging language growth. The theme is Adventures in the Past and the beginner level 10-12 year old learners are reading and looking at a page from a factual authentic book about how the first people spread from Africa to the rest of the world. The page is illustrated with a map of the world with the route marked in red, animals from the period and cavemen (Wow! People and Places). Language outcomes for the task were verb phrases: have got horns, teeth, fur; the first people invented clothing, weapons, tools and ways of making fire and passive recognition of the past simple tense.

Diogo: "How do you say 'extinto'?"

T: "It's 'extinct'."

Diogo: "The mamuth [sic] is extinct."

T: "Yes, that's right Diogo. Mammoths are extinct. Which other animals in the picture are extinct? ..."

(No responses from students) "OK, are elephants extinct?"

Various learners: "No."

T: "What about tigers?"

Students: "No."

The teacher asks about all the animals on the illustration. "What about sabre toothed tigers?"

Gonçalo: "Extinto"

T: "Extinct"

Gonçalo: "They extinct."

(Three lessons later)

T: "Who are they?" (Showing a different image of prehistoric man)

Ana Rita: "The cavemen live in Africa and they "espalhar" for the rest of world."

T: "They *spread* to the rest of the world. That's great Ana Rita."

When the first part of the above conversation was observed, the learners were fully engaged although they did not produce a lot of language. The abovementioned language areas from the text, including the learner-initiated addition of which animals were / were not extinct, was consolidated and recycled in the next lessons. The learner input in a subsequent lesson highlights how learners pick up chunks of language which are meaningful and memorable for them and which are not necessarily the target language.

The rich linguistic input of a theme-based approach clearly gives learners exposure to generative language patterns and allows them to explore themes through which language growth can develop. McKay explains how young learners (up to 13/14 years old) learn language through Skehan's model of cognitive processes in language learning, in which learners use both a formulaic system to understand and get meaning across and a rule-based system to draw on underlying rules to construct discourse (McKay 36-38). While 10-12 year olds are able to draw on both systems, McKay argues:

Since children have less developed metalinguistic ability the need to channel the bulk of children's attention towards meaning communication is vital if fluency is to be achieved. . . . Older learners in the later elementary school years develop greater metalinguistic awareness and become more able to gain knowledge of language rules from explicit language study. However, depending on the learning context, older elementary age learners still tend to rely strongly on a formulaic system. (38)

A theme-based approach gets learners learning how to communicate in English in meaningful ways, the rich linguistic input giving them exposure to generative language patterns. Furthermore, language work is included, only lessons and courses are not built on rule learning. As 10-12 year olds' language learning consists of both accumulating memory-based chunks of language and applying and noticing underlying language rules then a theme-based approach meets their language learning needs (McKay 38).

A key further advantage is the fact that the language learned in English is from a variety of discourse areas, relevant to 10-12 year olds' global education and future learning. Met gives high value to this factor, citing Widdowson in her comment, "Indeed, initiating L2 learners into

the discourse community of a given academic discipline can be a significant objective of content-based instruction" (Widdowson, qtd. in Met). The findings of the report into the Bilingual Project in Spain give further backing to the value and importance of learners learning the discourse of e.g. English language, literacy and science, to their proficiency in English and their learning in these other subject areas (Johnstone).

The issue of how learners learn language includes consideration of the relation of input to intake in language classrooms. As Willis has it, "students learn a great deal directly from exposure to language through reading and listening, without the need for the teacher to impose a description on what is learnt" (Willis iv). Both predictable and unpredictable language outcomes are a clear feature of a theme-based approach. Unpredicted language that arises and that is useful for the learners' language wants and needs (as in the above conversation about animals that are extinct) can, of course, be returned to in follow-up language slots. Clearly, a theme-based approach demands a level of experience and flexibility on our part as teachers. One of the problems which may arise from using this approach is a feeling from teachers, and perhaps coordinators, that they are not in control of the language learning going on in the class, as they feel they are with an approach in which structural items are methodologically worked through. As we have seen, the language learning of 10-12 year olds is not primarily concerned with the accumulation of language rules, therefore developing knowledge of how they learn languages and how input does not equal intake would help teachers deal with this issue. A further area of concern which a theme-based approach raises is classroom management. Trying to get learners to draw on prior knowledge as a class or in pairs / groups, scaffolding their attempts to communicate their ideas and meanings and providing maximum communicative opportunities all require planning and skill in classroom management. It is also important to bear in mind that a theme-based approach does require time for individual learning and language work. However, teachers need to be prepared to engage with their learners and to give them a more active class role.

As we have seen, a theme-based approach requires knowledge of different activity types and resources for planning and, for this reason, it is a good idea to work on planning with other teachers. Time is clearly required for the adaptation or creation of materials – as commercially

produced EFL or ESL materials which prioritise content over a structural syllabus for 10-12 year olds are limited – with an exception being the Macmillan English series. A key area to consider is the amount of time learners are spending on making or designing without using any English (Moon; Cameron). Solutions to this include the regular input of process language for activities, learners asking teachers or other learners for materials in English and teachers monitoring closely and asking questions.

To sum up, this paper has identified a theme-based approach as a way of teaching and learning English with 10-12 year olds that draws on their prior knowledge and their desire to communicate what they know, using all the linguistics resources they have at their disposal. The importance of language outcomes in this approach has been discussed along with how to plan and organise language learning in this way. The fact that a theme-based approach supports 10-12 year olds' language learning has been identified as a key benefit. The advantage of learning the discourse of other key subject areas through English has also been highlighted, setting a theme-based approach within the wider CLIL context. Problems that commonly occur with such an approach have been identified and some solutions put forward. Experiences in syllabus writing, observing lessons and teaching following this approach, taking place in courses for 10-12 year olds at BC Lisbon, have informed this discussion. This experience has shown clear benefits of this approach in capturing the interest, curiosity and eagerness to share knowledge of 10-12 year old learners and channeling this into their English language learning. This is a process of experimentation and learning in order to better meet the English language learning needs of learners of this age group. To conclude, a theme-based approach involves our 10-12 year old learners learning how to communicate in English in meaningful ways drawn from a variety of discourse areas and is an effective approach to teaching and learning English with this age group.

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