

The Thematic Approach to Language Teaching

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The thematic or topic approach to language teaching has two main advantages: firstly, the teacher and learner can readily identify specific learning targets for specific periods; secondly, a wide range of learning activities suggest themselves to both teacher and pupils. The 'thematic approach' simply means that the teacher of English in the primary or lower secondary class selects a few themes or topics for her English lessons each week, month or term as she sees fit. For example, the teacher in a Std. 4 class may select three themes or topics for the second school term: 'The jobs we do', or 'Music and Musical Instruments, or 'Communication'. The teacher may select these themes simply because she thinks they are interesting, or because they are useful for her structural and vocabulary work; or she may base them on a few of the passages from the class English reader. Her selection of topics will also depend on the ability and learning level of her pupils. For example, with a particularly weak Std. 4 the thematic development based on the three chapters on Music, and Musical Instruments in the New Primary Readers Book 4 (Dewan Bahasa) may not be very suitable. The vocabulary is rather difficult and the concepts developed in these chapters may be too foreign to the pupils' experience to be meaningful. However, a teacher in one of our town schools was able to do some very interesting work based on these same chapters in the class reader. Pupils were encouraged to speak on musical instruments they were familiar with; some brought pictures from magazines and newspapers. Two boys who were learning the violin brought their instruments to class and talked about them and even gave a little musical item, much to the class's delight! The written work, poems and the song 'Oh I can play on the violin' were all based on the topic.

Once she has selected a theme, let's say, for a period of six weeks in the second term, the teacher then has to organize the time she has available in terms of the learning targets she has identified. She may work it out that she has 30 teaching hours or 50 – 60 thirty-minute periods for English in the six-weeks. She selects the new structures she will teach (usually these are clearly indicated in the syllabus, readers, and English Language work-books) and she lists the new vocabulary she will include. She will also list the communicational situations she considers most appropriate for practising the structures and the particular kind of language usage she thinks useful. The topic she has selected will help her make these lists of words, sentences and situations.

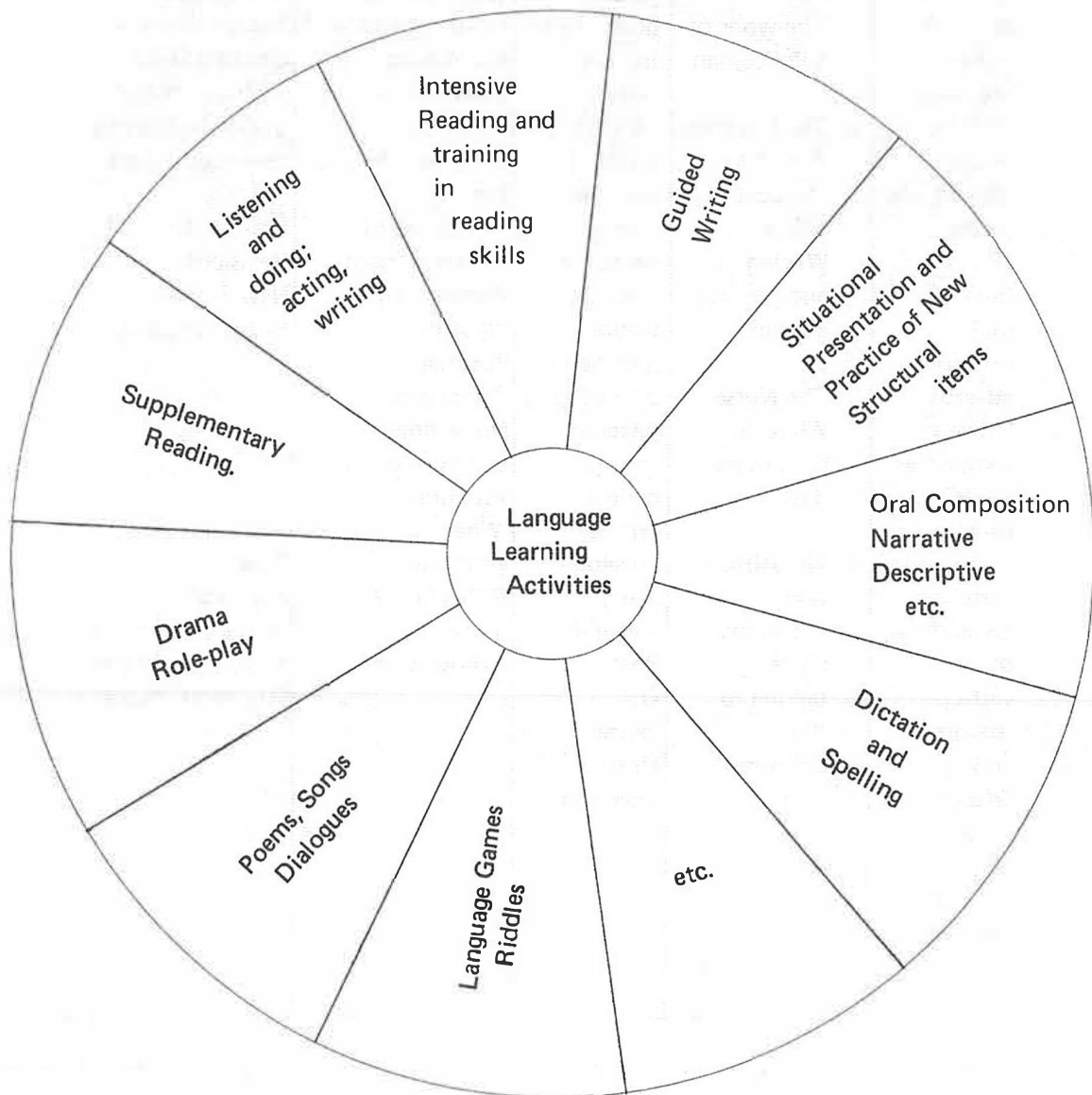
For instance, the teacher may wish to teach or revise items 104 – 108 of the English Syllabus for Primary Schools in Term II. She may select the topic, 'The Jobs We Do' and develop a six-week programme based on it. The programme would include training in the form of language skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing. She will need to summarize the content areas of her English lessons for the six-week programme for the Std. 4 class.

Structures	Theme or Topic	New Vocabulary	Situation for Communication	Reading Passage
Syllabus items 104, 106 and 108. Polite requests. 'Will you please, 'Would you please' (Revise item 46 mid position adverbs 'always, sometimes, never, usually, often, with verb 'to be' and other verbs. 'Before' and 'after' clauses using present tense and past tense	The Jobs we Do 1. The Policeman The work of a Policeman 2. The Postman A visit to the post office. Writing and posting a letter etc. 3. The Nurse – What she does every day. 4. The Airhostess A trip by plane – talking to the airhostess	Policeman traffic duties government injured obey vehicles arrests (v) accidents guards procession thieves trouble postman post office telegram address collect arrives envelope stamp General Post Office cancel Hospital injection	A dialogue based on Lesson 16, New Primary Reader, Book 4 e.g. Asking a policeman for help – using 'would you kindly Revise use of Simple Present Present Tense – What the Postman, Policeman, Nurse does. Lead up to situations 'What I do everyday' Role-play as nurse, airhostess etc.	Lesson 16: 'The Work of a Policeman' New Primary Reader. Book 4 Reading Skills Training: 'Why' questions-relating cause and effect. Lessons 13 & 14 (revision) New Primary Reader Book 3. Supplementary Reading: Richard Scarry 'Busy Busy World' 'The Work People Do'

The topics the teacher has selected will specify content for vocabulary and reading. These learning targets are made clear to the pupils and the vocabulary lists, sentences etc. should be available for pupil reference in the classroom. The advantage of the topic approach here is that the learning situation presents plentiful opportunity for repetition of structures and vocabulary and, more important, for practice in the various modes of language usage: 'excuse me', ... 'may I', 'would you please....', etc. in communication situations. The teacher and pupils can **together** create an 'environment' in the classroom for the learning of English.

As has been stated earlier, the aim here is not merely to teach the content but to teach language skills in terms of these specific sentence structures, words and modes of language usage. The teacher will therefore need to plan a variety of language learning activities. Within the context of the topic or theme a number of learning activities suggest themselves to the teachers.

Language Learning Activities.



With these language activities in mind, the teacher now needs to plan in terms of the time available for each language learning activity for the six-week period. Some of these activities may take up an entire 30 – 35 minute lesson while others may form part of a lesson. The teacher will have to work out a system of allocation of time for the various activities during each week. Perhaps a table like this may be useful.

Allocation of Language Learning Activities for week 1.
(ten 30 – minute lessons for English)

Practice of Structures	Oral Composition	Intensive Reading	Guided Writing	Poems, Songs Games	Vocabulary Work
(2 Lessons) Situational Presentation & Practice of item 106 The postman usually always sometimes arrives comes etc.	(1 lesson) Role-play. Postman – 'What I do every day' or 'What happens to my letter when I post it.'	(2 lessons) Lessons 13 and 14 New Primary Reader Book 3 (Dewan) Reading Skills and Structure practice; 'What does the.....' Sequencing	(1 lesson) Write letter inviting a friend to spend a weekend with you. Pupils address and post letters to each other. or, 'Write what you do every Sunday' using usually sometimes etc.	These will be integrated with other lessons in the programme Song: 'Mr Postman' (Popsong)	(1 lesson) List words in word-book. Practice in using a dictionary. Picture collage with labels.

A problem with this kind of integrated approach as with any innovative strategy that aims at being independent of the prescriptions in the text books and workbooks is the need for suitable materials. The teacher and her colleagues will have to work together as a team collecting and writing up some of the materials. If this is done as a cooperative activity among teachers teaching the same levels of pupils, and if the topics and structural items are kept in mind it can be fun and most productive. Much of this kind of material is available. The primary school teacher could use the whole range of English readers for standards two to six for her materials. For supplementary reading activities there are a number of fascinating books available in local bookstores.