

**The Home/School Connection:
Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education, PreK-8**
Issue 11

Thematic Units in the Elementary Foreign Language Classroom

Dear Parents,

Second language teaching has dramatically changed over the past few decades and your child is likely learning a language in a manner very different from the way in which you were instructed. You may wonder why your child learns about insects, the ocean, and deserts in language class. In this issue we will be discussing how these types of units, thematic units, have changed the elementary language classroom and why they are being used to teach language.

Thematic Units

In the past, foreign language teachers often used lists of vocabulary and grammar as the focus or theme of their units. Many parents learned a language this way. Today, more and more early language teachers are moving away from this approach and are using *thematic units* to teach the target language.

Thematic units often take concepts taught in other content areas such as science, math, social studies, music, and art and combine them with cultural points from the target language and culture. These concepts are used to teach the language. The

language teacher is able to connect everything taught in the unit to what is known as a *big idea*.

Most units in the elementary classroom curriculum are based on thematic centers and the classroom teacher reinforces content from other curricula through these units. This teaching strategy has become more and more common in the early language class.

Benefits

The central theme of the unit creates a *meaningful context* for learning the second language and prevents children from learning vocabulary in isolation. Teaching with a theme allows prior knowledge to be activated while children learn new vocabulary. Previously introduced concepts from both the second language class and other content areas are simultaneously reinforced.

Thematic units shift the focus from the language itself to using the language to achieve meaningful goals. The language teacher can bring the learners to the point of using the skills to gain access to important ideas and understanding. In thematic units, early language students practice and develop language functions such

as expressing likes and dislikes, describing, expressing opinions, comparing and obtaining information.

These units often have an authentic story from a target country as the thematic center. Culture no longer becomes a one-day lesson on an important holiday in the target culture, but instead is integrated within the thematic unit. Children leave their second language class with a richer experience and better understanding of the culture(s) being studied. Simulations of cultural experiences are easily incorporated into thematic units, to give the learners the opportunity to experience the target culture within the environment of the second language class.

Thematic units involve activities that engage the learner in complex thinking and problem-solving, and create opportunities for more sophisticated use of the target language. This can include reading poetry and stories, having conversations, reading and writing plays, and exchanging information.

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

This issue of Home/School Connection was written by Tammy Dann. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students' backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, NNELL's Early Language Advocate: trdann@q.com

Conclusion

Though thematic units are a relatively new concept for many parents, they have become a vital part of teaching other languages in today's early second language classroom. Second language learners go beyond learning vocabulary lists to learning something of lasting value in the target language. Through the implementation of thematic units, your child will have a more powerful experience with the target language.

Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004). *Languages and Children: Making the Match*. Boston: Pearson

Heyman, S & Morales, P. (2008). Advantages of a Thematic Approach. *Learning Languages*, 13, 21-22.