

Developing Dynamic Units for EFL

In foreign language situations, it can be challenging to find real-life communicative contexts in which to use the target language. When teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at any level, the classroom has to be a place in which language is not only taught but also used meaningfully. If language is being used “meaningfully” in the classroom, it is not taught only in isolated chunks or by breaking the language into its grammatical or semantic components. Instead, language is being used within a context that either mirrors real world discourse or possibly uses subject matter content, such as science, math, business, law, etc., depending on age of the learners and their purpose for studying English.

Using theme-based language instruction, which is one type of content-based instruction, can be helpful for various age groups and proficiency levels. Brinton (2003) supports the use of this approach when the purpose for EFL students is language acquisition. According to Brinton (2003, 203): “The thematic content stretches over several weeks of instruction, providing

rich input for lessons that are either language-based (i.e., with a focus on vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar) or skills-based (i.e., with a focus on listening, speaking, writing or reading). In this environment, students can successfully acquire language.” For EFL teachers, developing thematic units around their required curriculum can be a way to build a larger context in which to teach language that spans a group of lessons and can provide more opportunities for communicating in English.

A unit of instruction, as referred to in this article, consists of a series of lessons that are connected to each other, possibly by a theme, grammatical point, or language function. A lesson, as defined by Brown (2001, 149), “is popularly considered to be a unified set of activities that cover a period of classroom time, usually ranging from forty to ninety minutes.” Therefore, a thematic unit is a series of lessons, possibly for four to five classroom periods, that are connected by a topic or theme that connects students with language in a communicative manner.

Support for Use of Thematic Units

There is much support for using this kind of foreign language instruction. Haas (2000) states: "Planning thematic units allows the teacher to incorporate a variety of language concepts into a topic area that is interesting and worthy of study and that gives students a reason to use the language." In addition, Brinton (2003) points out that using this type of instruction provides optimal conditions for language acquisition because "(1) language is being continually recycled throughout the unit and (2) students are given multiple opportunities to use the new language they acquire as they read, discuss, and write about the topics" (201). Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) also support the use of thematic unit planning for grades K–8 because they contend that thematic units provide a meaningful context in which to teach language, thereby making the input more comprehensible as well as engaging the learner in more complex communicative situations that emulate real-life situations. Brown (2001) also points out that the use of theme-based instruction can be effective for EFL because it promotes automaticity, meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, and communicative competence, which, he says, "put principles of effective learning into action" (236). Furthermore, use of thematic units integrates all four language skills communicatively, and as Oxford (2001) explains, it is this type of skills integration that "exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language" (2). All this support for the use of thematic units is based in Krashen's (1985) notion that second language acquisition mirrors first language acquisition, which entails providing students with comprehensible and meaningful input in second language instruction. Certainly EFL teachers can apply this mode of instruction to foster acquisition in foreign language contexts.

If thematic units can be connected to familiar, interesting, and relevant topics for students, including grade level content for school age students, such units can provide opportunities to engage in real communication that can move beyond teaching language merely in its grammatical and semantic parts. In addition, as we will see in this article, the-

matic units can be a dynamic way to integrate all four language skills communicatively and promote learner autonomy through project-based instruction and experiential learning. Since experiential learning, which can be found in the form of project work, "provides opportunities for the negotiation of meaning between learners in pair work and group work activities," it can help build the kind of acquisition environment that is needed in foreign language contexts (Eyring 2001, 335). It is through this notion of learning by doing, which is at the heart of experiential learning, that the classroom can become more than just a place to learn a foreign language; it becomes a place of meaningful communication using English and an independent process in which learners can think critically and make choices in realistic situations.

Characteristics of Dynamic Units

This article will suggest some ways to make your EFL units more dynamic. These techniques can be applied to all grade levels as well as proficiency levels and can be applied to classrooms that are required to follow a set curriculum as well as classrooms that have more creative freedom. As we will see in the examples provided in this article, dynamic units for EFL instruction have five characteristics; they:

1. incorporate real life situations in instruction.
2. integrate all four language skills communicatively.
3. encourage learner autonomy or learner choice.
4. use experiential learning.
5. apply project-based learning.

These characteristics are not completely separate from each other since incorporating real life situations that are genuinely communicative tend to integrate the four language skills naturally. In addition, the use of experiential and project-based learning both encourage learner choice and autonomy, and using project work can be considered one kind of experiential learning. Therefore, the list is not mutually exclusive. However, the five characteristics are all, in their separate ways, important for an EFL teacher to consider when developing units of instruction based on a particular theme in order to spark learner

interest and provide real opportunities in the classroom for communication in English.

Five Steps for Planning a Thematic Unit

Now we will look at five steps toward building more dynamic units. Within each step are suggestions for application, which revolve around a specific example of a unit that can be applied in many different contexts—*Eating Out With Friends*.

Step 1: Examine curriculum standards and required units for the class.

First, consider what your students are required to learn, based on the curriculum standards set by your Ministry of Education and/or your school; then develop a theme that can support the current educational goals of your particular program or class. From there the challenge will be to build a thematic unit that can provide the learner with a larger context within which students can make meaningful connections while learning a foreign language. For school age students, it is highly recommended to make the learning process more holistic by connecting between the foreign language class and students' other classes since the most relevant topics for young learners revolve around their subject matter content (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). Therefore, a study of the grade level curriculum for students in their required subjects might also be useful. However, regardless of age level or relevant subject matter content, the starting point for the thematic units should come from your EFL program's curricular goals; once you meet those goals, you can move toward what interests and motivates learners the most.

Application: Eating Out With Friends Unit

Many EFL textbooks have a chapter or section on food and drink or ordering food in a restaurant. It is a common topic for language instruction that has real-life application particularly because international travel is a main purpose for learning English. The language functions for ordering food at a restaurant and asking for the check or bill are easily found in most textbooks for English at the adult, secondary, and even primary levels. Therefore, the example for developing a thematic unit in this article will focus on this commonly used topic for EFL instruction.

Step 2: Choose a theme that is meaningful and relevant to students.

There are several considerations when selecting an appropriate theme (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004; Crandall 1998). The theme should:

- be motivating, interesting, and relevant to the learners (and teacher).
- connect to real-life situations, including content from across the curriculum for school age children.
- appeal to and/or develop various learning styles and intelligences.
- provide a context for meaningful, authentic discourse and interaction.
- facilitate the development of appropriate, useful and real-world language functions and communication modes.
- connect to the target culture(s), wherever possible.

The most important aspects of choosing an appropriate theme are that it be interesting and meaningful to students and that it have potential for real-life application. Realistically, it is necessary to acknowledge that the choice of theme may be determined by the required texts or curriculum of the school or school system, but the choice of materials and activities in the next steps can make any theme more motivating, interesting, and relevant to students.

Application: Eating Out With Friends Unit

In order to choose a theme that incorporates the commonly found topic in various textbooks mentioned in Step 1—ordering at a restaurant—we need to consider the audience and real life communicative situation. Even though we could use variations of this content for learners at all levels, let's consider creating a lesson for secondary students at the high school level. A common context in which young adults would use language for ordering at a restaurant would be for "Eating Out With Friends." As we will see in the next few sections, this theme and its real-life application will be the defining organizational force in the planning process. Note that the theme is much broader than ordering food at a restaurant and has been created to incorporate this language function into a larger communicative context.

Step 3: Brainstorm ideas that can incorporate real-life situations and tasks.

Using a web, chart, or list can be helpful to brainstorm ideas. The approach to brainstorming can be based on real-life tasks that are necessary for communication or based on different subject or content areas. The approach to brainstorming depends on the purpose or approach to your particular EFL classroom. For example, if you wanted to develop a unit for young learners (5–12 years old) related to content, then you might consider webbing activity ideas based on the various subjects the learners study, such as math, science, social studies, physical education, art, etc. This is a way to infuse the subject content that students are learning into foreign language instruction, since that content is meaningful to their lives.

However, thematic units do not necessarily have to incorporate content from different school subjects. Choice of an appropriate theme should always be based on what is most interesting and relevant to your learners and can often be based on purposeful, real-life tasks in a particular social situation or context.

Application: Eating Out With Friends Unit

Because this thematic unit is based on an authentic social situation that includes specific communicative tasks, the brainstorming revolved around the different stages of the social event. Notice that in Figure 1 there are various ways to invite friends to dinner, to make a reservation, or to get to the restaurant. The purpose of the brainstorming is to write

down every possibility in order to decide which ones are going to be the best ones to use based on availability of resources, level of difficulty, and the variety of skills and text types.

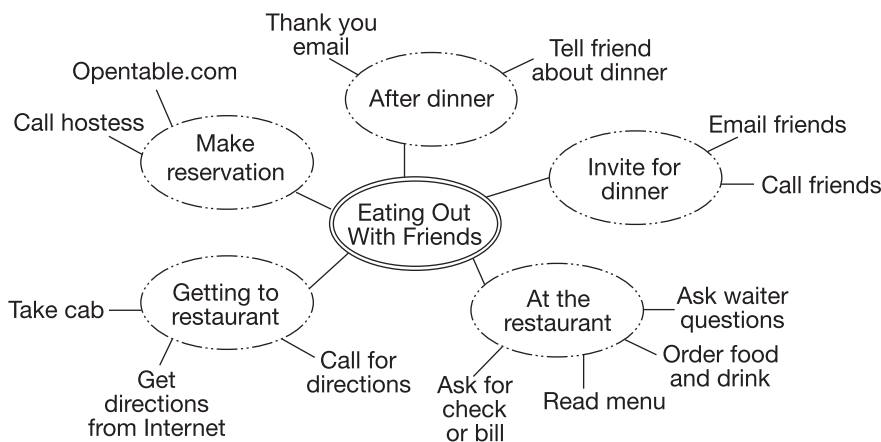
Step 4: Choose, organize, and order the activities.

After brainstorming ideas for a particular theme, it is a good idea to put these ideas in a chart. (See Figure 2.) Putting the activities in a chart helps you to see what kinds of activities can be used and what content is covered. In addition to creating a meaningful context in which to teach language, it is also important to order the activities effectively. When organizing and ordering the activities in a unit, you will want to think about:

1. varying the tasks and language skills.
2. choosing the activities that are the most useful to your learners.
3. ordering the tasks to mirror the real life application of the tasks.
4. connecting one activity to the next, i.e. from receptive to productive skills.
5. sequencing the content in order to recycle language and scaffold students' learning.

This is an important step in planning individual lessons within a unit. In order to make sure that the unit is relevant and motivating for the learners, it might be helpful to give the learners some power to choose which activities might be most useful and interesting for them. Whenever possible, try to give the learners some autonomy in the planning stages.

Figure 1: Brainstorming real-life tasks with a web



Application: Eating Out With Friends Unit

Notice in Figure 2 that the activities that had been brainstormed in the web above have been ordered based on the real-life order of the various tasks. In addition, the language skills and content used for each communicative function have been listed as well. Obviously in most activities the skills are naturally integrated because the communication is two way; therefore, reading and writing tend to be paired as well as listening and speaking. Now that the activities are ordered, it might be necessary to eliminate some depending on availability of resources. For example, if students cannot get easy access to the Internet, then it might be difficult to get directions through Google Maps (maps.google.com). However, you might keep the activities for making Internet reservations and finding information on restaurants on OpenTable.com by printing out samples from your own computer and handing out hard copies of screen shots for authentic reading practice. As discussed above, the choice of which way to invite someone or to make a dinner reservation, orally over the phone or in writing through email, could be decided by the learners themselves. If one way is more interesting or relevant to them, they can let you know which one to incorporate in instruction. In the chart, the tasks chosen for this unit are shaded. Notice that the tasks chosen for the unit balance the instruction of all four skills, recycle the use of language content, and can be incorporated well into the project developed in the next step.

Based on the tasks chosen, the unit could then be planned as five consecutive lessons:

Thematic Unit: Eating Out With Friends

Lesson 1: Inviting friends to dinner by phone

Lesson 2: Using OpenTable.com
(includes finding a restaurant and making a reservation)

Lesson 3: Getting directions to a restaurant

Lesson 4: Ordering food at a restaurant
(includes reading the menu)

Lesson 5: After eating out with friends
(includes thank you email and talking to a friend)

Step 5: Incorporate projects that can encourage learner choice and autonomy

Once you have chosen the activities and established the order of the activities, you can develop a project in which the learners can use the language communicatively by experiencing the language in a realistic situation. This project should connect to all of the lessons and be an integral part of the unit. Use of project-based learning or project work offers the following positive points for foreign language learning: It focuses on real-world subject matter and topics of interest, is student-centered, is cooperative, integrates skills authentically, has a real purpose, is motivating, and fosters learner autonomy (Alan and Stoller 2005; Stoller 1997). A good project should encourage learners to cooperate with each other using the target language communicatively, and it should incorporate all of the language learned in the whole unit. The project should also allow learners to make choices and think critically about the subject matter.

Application: Eating Out With Friends Unit

The project for this unit is ongoing, and students work together in the same groups throughout the duration of the unit. In groups of 4 or 5, students create their own restaurant, which entails deciding on the type of cuisine, type of dining (i.e., casual, casual elegant, or fine dining) and the name of the restaurant and then writing a description of the restaurant, an appropriate food and drink menu, and a map with directions to the restaurant. Then the students will prepare their restaurant for others to see on Restaurant Day, which is scheduled at the end of the unit. There are two established goals for this project:

Goal 1: Each group will prepare a restaurant and classmates will be their customers. Preparation of the restaurant will begin after students learn about different restaurants when using OpenTable.com or reading hard copy samples from that site. On Restaurant Day, the restaurants will be set up in different areas of the room, and students will take turns practicing English while making a reservation for a customer, giving directions to the customer, and then hosting a group of friends eating out.

Figure 2: Organizing tasks with a chart

Real-life Tasks	Skills	Language Content
Inviting through email and accepting an invitation	Reading, writing	Letter form – greeting, body, signature Present Progressive/Future Tense <i>I am going to...What are you doing on...?</i> <i>I am having... Will you be free...?</i> Asking opinion <i>What kind of cuisine/food/restaurant do you prefer?</i> Vocabulary: cuisines, types of dining, price range, types of food and drink
Calling friends to go out and eat and accepting phone invitations	Listening, speaking	Phone greetings and farewells Present Progressive/Future Tense <i>I am going to...What are you doing on...?</i> <i>I am having... Will you be free...?</i> Asking opinion <i>What kind of cuisine/food/restaurant do you prefer?</i> Vocabulary: cuisines, types of dining, price range, types of food and drink
Making a dinner reservation over the phone	Listening, speaking	Requesting/making reservation <i>I would like to make a reservation for...on...</i> <i>Would you like to...?</i> How many in your party?
Finding a restaurant; reading restaurant descriptions and sample menus on OpenTable.com	Reading, writing	Scanning for information Vocabulary: cuisines, locations, types of dining, price range, party size, types of food and drink
Making an Internet reservation through OpenTable.com	Reading, writing	Scanning for information Vocabulary: cuisines, locations, types of dining, price range, party size, types of food and drink
Finding directions to the restaurant through Google Maps (maps.google.com) and sending them to friends	Reading, writing	Reading a map and directions <i>Go straight... Turn left/right at...</i> Writing email to friends with a link to map and directions
Taking a cab and giving driver directions	Listening, speaking	Giving directions: Imperative <i>Go straight... Turn left/right at...</i>
Calling the restaurant for directions and giving directions to your friend	Listening, speaking	Giving directions: Imperative <i>Go straight... Turn left/right at...</i> Discourse markers: <i>First, Next, Then, Now, etc.</i>
Reading a menu	Reading, writing	Vocabulary: different food, drinks, cuisines
Ordering food from a waiter and asking for the check/bill	Listening, speaking	Request <i>I would like...Could we have...?</i> <i>Would you like...?</i>
Writing a thank you email to friends and responding to a thank you email	Reading, writing	Thank you letter form – greeting, body, signature Thank you so much for... I really appreciated... Past tense
Talking to another friend about the dinner	Listening, speaking	Past tense Discourse markers: <i>First, Next, Then, Now, etc.</i>

Goal 2: Each group will go out with a group of friends in twos or threes. Students will first engage in inviting and accepting invitations, making reservations, and finding directions to the restaurant, which will occur during class time in the various lessons in the unit. On Restaurant Day, students will engage in a role play in which they eat at one of their classmates' restaurants. Finally, students will send thank you notes to each other and tell another friend what happened at dinner.

With these goals, students will participate in a project that will encourage creativity with the language content as well as real communication in English. In addition, it will provide a way for students to experience the language for all the different tasks involved with eating out with friends since foreign language contexts cannot provide a real world experience in English.

Conclusion

More detailed lesson plans must be designed for each day of instruction; however, the five steps suggested in this article with the examples for application have given some useful ideas for how to conceptualize a theme and develop effective units for EFL instruction. The example unit called *Eating Out With Friends* shows how to bring real-life tasks into the classroom, integrate all four skills communicatively, encourage learner autonomy, use project work, and employ experiential learning. Units of instruction which have these characteristics will most likely lead learners to improve their ability to communicate in English and make classes more lively and motivating. Even in countries where real-life communicative contexts in English are hard to find, EFL teachers can still plan creatively around their required curriculum in order to build dynamic thematic units that can bring authentic communication into the classroom.

References

- Alan, B., and F. L. Stoller. 2005. Maximizing the benefits of project work in foreign language classrooms. *English Teaching Forum* 42(4), 10–21.
- Brinton, D. 2003. Content-based instruction. In *Practical English Language Teaching*, ed. D. Nunan, 199–224. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Crandall, J. 1998. The expanding role of the elementary ESL teacher: Doing more than teaching language. *ESL Magazine*. <http://www.eslmag.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=15>
- Curtain, H., and C.A. Dahlberg. 2004. *Languages and children: Making the match*. Boston: Pearson.
- Eyring, J. L. 2001. Experiential and negotiated language learning. In *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 3rd ed. ed. M. Celce-Murcia, 333–44. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Haas, M. 2000. Thematic, communicative language teaching in the K–8 classroom. *ERIC Digest*, EDO-FL-00-04. <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digestpdfs/0004-thematic-haas.pdf>
- Krashen, S. D. 1985. *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London: Longman.
- Oxford, R. 2001. Integrated skills in the ESL/EFL classroom. *CAL Digest*, EDO-FL-01-05. <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0105oxford.html>
- Stoller, F. L. 1997. Project work: A means to promote language content. *English Teaching Forum*, 35(4): 2–9; 37.

JOAN KANG SHIN, a full-time lecturer in the Education Department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), is the Coordinator of Online and Off-campus Programs in the ESOL/Bilingual Education MA Program. She is a doctoral candidate in the Language, Literacy and Culture PhD program at UMBC and works as an English Language Specialist for the U.S. Department of State.