Bilingual/Dual Language Education: Q&A 5

Question: How is thematic lesson plan different in dual language instruction?

Answer: Many KES and KMS teachers organize their curriculum in thematic units. The advantages of thematic units in dual language education are listed below, but first let’s clarify what they are not.

“Thematic lesson plan differs from ‘cha cha cha curriculum’ and ‘gummy bear approach.’ Second language learners often get lost in the transition in ‘cha cha cha curriculum’ where new subjects are introduced one after another. For example, students might study insects in science, different community workers in social studies, rhyming words in language arts, fractions in math and ‘ea’ words for spelling. The different content areas are not related.”

In ‘gummy bear approach’ “students might read a book like Ira Sleeps Over and talk about how Ira is comforted by his stuffed bear. Then in math, students might stack up gummy bears to make a graph. There is an attempt to connect, but the connection is not authentic. Students aren’t developing a deep understanding of a topic.”

It is reported that an effective way of teaching in dual language education is through team teaching using thematic approach. “Thematic units are organized around big questions. For example, a theme could investigate the relationships and interdependencies of insects and humans. Students could try to answer questions like how do insects depend on humans, and how do humans depend on insects? And how are humans and insects alike, and how are they different? The big questions help provide unity for the theme and ensure that the connections among subject areas are not simply token efforts. As students move from one subject area to the next, they continue to gather information to help answer important questions.

“Kucer, Silva, and Delgado-Larocco (1995) discuss how they moved away from the gummy bear approach to thematic teaching. They write, ‘Our earlier attempts at thematic instruction resulted in units that meshed a large number of loosely related materials and activities around a central topic.’ Such approach did not serve the students. They point out that the materials and activities should help students arrive at the big picture. For that reason, ‘students need a curriculum that supports them in making links and connections.’

“To help teachers conceptualize an integrated curriculum that moves beyond the gummy bear approach, Kucer and his colleagues conceptualize curriculum as a hierarchy with facts at the bottom, concepts in the middle, and generalizations at the top. They observe that ‘one of the most important goals of the schools is to help students learn to construct generalizations from the concepts and facts developed across various learning experiences’. One way to ensure that curriculum helps students develop generalizations instead of focusing on isolated facts is to organize themes based on big questions. As students formulate answers to these questions, they arrive at generalizations that relate the key concepts and are supported by specific facts. The big question keeps both students and teachers focused on the big picture.”

Why organize curriculum around themes for dual language instruction?
There are many reasons why, but the following points are particularly relevant to our inquiry.

1) **Themes provide a continuous preview, view, review in dual language.**
   Preview/view/review allows teachers to make the second language more comprehensible by giving an introduction, or preview, in the students’ first language, then teaching the content in the second language using a number of techniques to make the input comprehensible, and finally reviewing after the lesson in the students’ first languages (Freeman and Freeman 2000).

   Here’s an example from a 50/50 Spanish-English dual language program where students study different content areas in different languages. While it might be more appropriate to choose other activities in the Hawaiian cultural context, one can see from the following example how thematic organization works. “Students might read poetry about insects in English during English language arts and in Spanish during Spanish language arts and write poetry in both languages. If they study social studies and science in Spanish, they would read about insects, investigate their migration habits on the Internet, plot their locations on a map, and observe insects and keep journals all in Spanish. During math in English, students would investigate where different insects are usually found and graph the kinds of insects by continent. For Spanish speakers, the study in Spanish serves as a preview and review for the poetry study in English language arts and for the math activity in English. For English speakers, the study in English functions as a preview and review for the Spanish language arts, social studies, and science lessons. It is important to remember that the content is not repeated in each language. Instead, what is taught in one language builds on the same concepts as the lesson taught in the other language.”

2) **Students know what the topic is as they begin to study in a new content area, even when this new content is taught in their second language.** They do not waste time trying to figure out what the lesson is about. Their focus across content areas remains on the significant questions they are investigating.

3) **Students more easily learn the content because teaching around themes helps students develop academic content.** Students need repeated exposure to academic vocabulary to acquire it. Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) found that native speakers needed to see a word several times in meaningful contexts to acquire the word’s meaning and function. During thematic teaching, all students see and hear the key words connected to the topic several times.

Dual Language Essentials For Teachers And Administrators by Yvonne S. Freeman, David E. Freeman, Sandra P. Mercuri, pp. 98 – 103.

In an educational age when meeting standards are an integral part of teaching strategy and “unwrapping standards” means teaching consciously with big ideas and essential questions, dual language thematic organization is something with which we can easily relate. Even in monolingual context, thematic organization makes sense.

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