



Theme-based Teaching in an English Course for Primary ESL Students in Hong Kong

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang

(rccyang@ied.edu.hk)

The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, China

Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate learners' perceptions and the impact of a theme-based teaching approach on children's level of interest in an English course for primary English as a second language (ESL) students in a non-school setting in Hong Kong. A total of 88 participants (consisting 76 Grade 4 and 5 children, and 12 course tutors) were involved. To ascertain if the children became more interested in learning English after the course, their perceptions of theme-based teaching, and their opinions of the themes chosen for the English course, data were collected from both the children (through pre- and post-course questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews) and the course tutors (through questionnaires for the tutors). The major finding is that theme-based teaching in this study could not make learners more interested in learning English, unless teachers were able to use interesting activities and suitable materials in their lessons. The themes of the course should suit the proficiency level, wants and needs of the learners and be relevant to their daily lives. Before the course begins, a placement test should be administered to ascertain the current language level of the learners. There should be post-course evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the course.

1 Introduction

Hong Kong is a prosperous city in Southeast Asia. However, it is estimated that over 250,000 children live in poor or low-income families. This situation is illustrated by the number of cases on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme¹ administered by the Social Welfare Department, Hong Kong. According to the government's figures, at the end of 2006, there were a total of 295,333 CSSA cases. Among these 295,333 cases, 18,257 cases (6.2%) belonged to low income cases, which refer to those recipients with employment income of less than \$1,435 a month (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). Compared to their more fortunate peers, the children living in poor or low-income families are disadvantaged in their living and learning environments. As a result, they are more likely to have low self-esteem.

The Revive My Dreams Project launched by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA)² aims to help deprived children, through positive learning experiences, to explore their potential and strengths, and to enhance their learning capability, creativity and problem-solving skills so that they will have a more positive attitude to face challenges in their lives. Part of this project is an English course for Primary 4 and 5 (i.e. Grade 4 and 5) children from low income families in Hong Kong³.

The students in the investigated course belonged to the second cohort of the English course within the whole Revive My Dreams Project, but it was the first attempt in which a theme-based teaching approach was adopted. Theme-based teaching has been adopted by primary schools in UK since the 1960s. However, there was not much previous research devoted to evaluate its effec-

tiveness. Therefore, this study was conducted to uncover learners' perceptions and the impact of a theme-based teaching approach on their level of interest in the English course. It is hoped that the results obtained will be useful for course design in the future. To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions were asked:

1. Have the children become more interested in learning English after the English course?
2. What are the children's perceptions of theme-based teaching?
3. What are the children's opinions of the themes chosen for the English course?
4. Among the different themes of the English course, which one do the children like most and why?

2 Literature review

Theme-based teaching (also termed theme-based instruction or topic-based teaching) is one of the approaches within the broader model of content-based instruction (CBI)⁴ in which the emphasis is on exposing students to a "highly contextualized" second language environment by using the subject matter as the content of language learning (Wesche & Skehan, 2002, p. 220). It is an approach to language teaching in which the whole course is structured around certain themes or topics (Brinton, 2001; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Theme-based instruction differs from traditional language instruction in that the language structures/items to be covered in a syllabus are determined by the theme or topic (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). In a theme-based course, different teaching activities are integrated by their content, the teaching of different skill areas is incorporated into the theme (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003), and "the theme or topic ... acts as a connecting thread" (Cameron, 2001, p. 180). The rationale for this thematic approach is to "avoid[s] fragmentation and unconnected skill exercises" and a variety of activities are integrated around meaningful content (Berry & Mindes, 1993, p. 6).

Theme-based teaching is an approach in which different areas of the curriculum are integrated instead of being separated into different subjects. It is considered that teaching which is integrated around a theme suits the way children naturally learn (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, theme-based teaching has been transferred from general primary education to the teaching of English as a foreign language because it provides learners with motivating and meaningful uses of the language (Cameron, 2001). Other important advantages of theme-based teaching for language learning, as suggested by Cameron (2001), include the fact that new vocabulary items can be learned easily, with the theme providing a meaningful context for understanding, and for the natural use of a wide range of discourse types, both written and spoken.

To choose themes for a language course, we have to consider their interest potential and appropriateness for students. It is also a good idea to choose themes that are relevant to children (Berry & Mindes, 1993; Howe et al., 1991). Freeman and Freeman (2006, p. 64) suggest that "[w]hen the content of the lesson is relevant and interesting, students are more likely to try harder to understand and to stay focused." Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) also believe that if the lesson content is perceived to be relevant by the learners, their motivation is more likely to increase and effective learning can then be promoted. There is a positive relationship between language learning and motivation in which successful language learning is dependent upon a student's motivation, no matter what his or her level is (Wiesen, 2000, 2001). The type of motivation that many teachers expect their students to develop in their learning in the long-run is intrinsic motivation, which involves "performing an activity for its own sake rather than as a means to an end" (Hidi, 2000, p. 315). In other words, it means that someone performs an activity because of his or her personal interest, but not to achieve certain goals. Deci (1998) believes that "intrinsically motivated behaviour is done because it is interesting" (p. 149). Therefore, it is believed that children will persevere in learning English if they find the English course interesting and become more interested in English. However, some forms of intrinsic motivation is related to achieving goals. The Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), which identifies intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, suggests that when people are motivated, they undertake goal-oriented actions in order to accomplish something. It is also suggested that motivated action

may be self-determined, that is, it is done not because of external force but because it is motivated by one's self and is experienced as freely chosen (Brophy, 2004).

Previous research on the effectiveness of theme-based language courses has been surprisingly limited. One recent study that addressed this issue was conducted by Alptekin, Erçetin, and Bayyurt (2007), who in a quasi-experimental study investigated the effectiveness of a theme-based syllabus and a grammatical syllabus for Turkish learners of English in a primary school setting. The results of this study showed that EFL learners using a theme-based syllabus developed better English proficiency than those using a grammatical syllabus in both listening and reading or writing. While Kirschner and Wexler (2002) presented a content-based unit in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) reading course for first-year students in a university context, the present study was specifically conducted to find out the students' perceptions and the impact of theme-based teaching in an English course for primary English as a second language (ESL) learners in a non-school setting in Hong Kong. It is hoped that the findings of this study can contribute to the field of education.

3 Methodology

3.1 *The English course*

The English course of the Revive My Dreams Project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- To raise the children's interest and to reduce their fear of learning English;
- To enhance the children's foundation in English, including the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary; and
- To provide a 'safe' environment for the children to learn and practice English.

Its target participants were Primary 4 and 5 children from low income families. Though the participants were selected by their schools, BGCA community centres or other non-government organisations, their enrollment in the English course was voluntary, based on their parents' and/or their own preference. The course was run in the seven centres of the BGCA. These seven centres are distributed in seven different districts in Hong Kong (To Kwa Wan, Ma On Shan, Aberdeen, Yau Tong, Tseung Kwan O, Tsz Wan Shan, and Tai Po) respectively. The class size was 8 to 13 children in each centre. The tutors for the course were all full-time English-major students of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd). There were 20 sessions in the whole course (one and a half hours each session, with one session each week). Since different centres started and finished the course at different times, the duration of the whole course for the seven centres was from early June to early December 2008.

The approach adopted in the course was a theme-based approach in which five different themes were chosen and determined by the course tutors and were covered in the course using a variety of activities and tasks. The five themes covered in the English course were: 1) About me; 2) Food; 3) Fun places in Hong Kong; 4) Transportation; and 5) The Olympics. By covering these five themes, it was expected that the children's four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing), grammar and vocabulary knowledge will be enhanced. In order to help the researcher evaluate the impact of a theme-based teaching approach on children's level of interest of the English course, all the teaching activities and materials used in the seven centres were the same. These activities were of different formats such as role-play of the target language functions, designing a poster, conducting a survey about classmates' favourite food, vocabulary matching games, guided writing tasks etc.

3.2 *Participants*

A total of 88 participants ($n = 88$) were involved in this study – the 76 children enrolled in the English course of the Revive My Dreams Project and the 12 course tutors. There were 36 Primary

4 and 40 Primary 5 ESL students, aged between 8 and 12. Among these children, 28 were males and 48 were females. The course tutors (3 males and 9 females) were all full-time undergraduate English-major students of HKIEd. Two were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Languages) programme, while six were studying for their Bachelor of Education (English Language) and four were taking the Bachelor of Education (Primary) programme. The data given by two children for the pre-course questionnaire had to be eliminated because they were incomplete. Therefore, there were only 74 children in the data analysis. In the last session of the course, because many children were absent as it was near the exam period of most primary schools, only 65 post-course questionnaire forms were distributed and collected back.

3.3 Instruments and procedures

The children enrolled in the English course of the Revive My Dreams Project were briefed on the purpose of the study and reminded that their participation was voluntary before distributing the pre-course questionnaires. Also, the course tutors were asked to sign an informed consent form to make sure that they understood the purpose and procedures of the study.

In the first session of the English course, the pre-course questionnaires (Appendix A) were distributed to the children to explore their initial interest in English. At the end of the whole course, the post-course questionnaires (Appendix B) were distributed to investigate if the children had become more interested in learning English, and to examine their perceptions of theme-based teaching adopted in the English course and their opinions of the themes chosen for the course. The question items in both the pre- and post-course questionnaires were bilingual so that the children could understand the items easily. The children were assured of their anonymity. Their personal details were elicited in Section 1. In Section 2, all the question items were in a 4-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree' (4 = 'Strongly agree'; 3 = 'Agree'; 2 = 'Disagree'; 1 = 'Strongly disagree'). A 'Neutral' option was avoided because Busch (1993) mentions that "neutrality can lead to indecisive data, particularly among those groups whose cultures value indirect responses" (p. 735). Then, in Section 3, the children were required to place the themes chosen for the English course in a rank order. The questionnaires were collected immediately by either the researcher, or the course tutors, when the children finished completing them.

Apart from the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C for the interview questions) were conducted with the children. Three to four children were randomly selected from each centre (depending on the total number of children in a certain centre) and interviewed in small groups so that "greater depth and richness of information" (McMillan, 2004, p. 167) about their perceptions of the English course and the themes could be obtained, and they would feel less threatened in answering the interviewer's questions. In all, 23 children (9 males and 14 females) were interviewed. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese so that the children could understand the researcher's questions and express their opinions easily, without any language barrier. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed qualitatively to identify the main themes using a grounded theory study. A coding paradigm was used in which central themes were generated and a theory could then be developed (McMillan, 2000).

In order to achieve triangulation of the collected data, a questionnaire (see Appendix D) was also sent to the course tutors through email and collected in order to find out what they observed in their teaching, including the children's responses towards the themes, materials and activities designed. The return rate of the course tutors' questionnaires was 91.7%.

4 Results

The four research questions mentioned at the beginning of this paper will be answered in this section based on the results of the pre- and post-course questionnaires (see Table 1 below for a summary of the findings), semi-structured interviews of the children, and the feedback given by the course tutors in response to the tutors' questionnaire.

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	D	SD	M	*SD
Student's interest in English						
1. I like English						
Pre-course	8 (11%)	36 (48%)	20 (27%)	10 (14%)	2.57	0.86
Post-course	10 (15%)	35 (54%)	16 (25%)	4 (6%)	2.78	0.78
2. I like having English lesson						
Pre-course	11 (15%)	32 (43%)	22 (30%)	9 (12%)	2.61	0.89
Post-course	10 (15%)	34 (52%)	14 (22%)	7 (11%)	2.72	0.86
3. Learning English is fun						
Pre-course	12 (16%)	33 (45%)	21 (28%)	8 (11%)	2.66	0.88
Post-course	9 (14%)	32 (49%)	19 (29%)	9 (8%)	2.69	0.81
4. Having English lesson is fun						
Pre-course	14 (19%)	30 (41%)	21 (28%)	9 (12%)	2.66	0.93
Post-course	11 (17%)	34 (52%)	13 (20%)	7 (11%)	2.75	0.87
5. Learning English is satisfied						
Pre-course	14 (19%)	29 (39%)	23 (31%)	8 (11%)	2.66	0.91
Post-course	9 (14%)	38 (58%)	11 (17%)	7 (11%)	2.75	0.83
6. After completing the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course, I like English more than before.	15 (23%)	32 (49%)	12 (19%)	6 (9%)	2.86	0.88
Perception of theme-base teaching						
7. Teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized.	12 (18%)	44 (68%)	6 (9%)	3 (5%)	3.00	0.68
8. Learning English becomes more meaningful.	15 (23%)	40 (61%)	7 (11%)	3 (5%)	3.03	0.73
9. Learning English becomes more interesting.	19 (29%)	31 (48%)	10 (15%)	5 (8%)	2.98	0.87
10. Vocabulary items can be learned more easily.	15 (23%)	34 (52%)	10 (16%)	6 (9%)	2.89	0.87
11. More vocabulary items around a certain theme can be learned.	21 (32%)	35 (54%)	7 (11%)	2 (3%)	3.15	0.73
Opinions of the themes chosen for the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course						
12. The themes chosen for the English course are interesting.	15 (23%)	34 (53%)	12 (19%)	3 (5%)	2.95	0.79
13. The themes chosen for the English course suit my interest.	14 (22%)	27 (42%)	19 (30%)	4 (6%)	2.80	0.86
14. The themes chosen for the English course suit my English level.	13 (20%)	34 (53%)	10 (16%)	7 (11%)	2.83	0.88
15. The themes chosen for the English course are relevant to my daily life.	17 (27%)	38 (59%)	5 (8%)	4 (6%)	3.06	0.77

Notes:

1. Pre-course questionnaires: $n = 74$; Post-course questionnaires: $n = 65$
2. SA = Strongly agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly disagree; M = Mean; *SD = Standard deviation
3. Items 6 to 15 only appear in the post-course questionnaire.

Table 1: Summary of the findings of the pre- and post-course questionnaires

4.1 Research question 1: Have the children become more interested in learning English after the English course?

Generally speaking, the children were rather positive towards English and a higher percentage of them became more interested in English after finishing the course. Before the English course, slightly more than half of the children (59%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement "I like

English” (Item 1) ($M=2.57$). After the course, a higher percentage of the children agreed and strongly agreed (69%; $M=2.78$). In the pre-course questionnaire, 58% of the children agreed and strongly agreed with the statement “I like having English lessons” (Item 2) ($M=2.61$). Then, in the post-course questionnaire, a higher percentage of them (67%) agreed and strongly agreed that they like having English lessons ($M=2.72$). More than half of them also agreed and strongly agreed that “Learning English is fun” and “Having English lessons is fun”, both before (61% for the former and 60% for the latter item) and after the English course (63% and 69% respectively in the two items). For the item “Learning English is satisfying” (Item 5), before the English course, only 58% of the children agreed and strongly agreed with it ($M=2.66$). However, after the course, more children (72%) agreed and strongly agreed ($M=2.75$), and 72% of them thought that they like English more than before after completing the ‘Revive My Dreams Project’ English course ($M=2.86$).

The positive attitude towards English after the English course can also be observed through the semi-structured interviews. The children like English more than before because of the use of activities in the English course and the course contents. Some examples of the children’s feedback, translated from the Cantonese original, are presented below:

I didn’t like English in the past but now I like it because the course tutors used games to teach English. (Student 3)

I like English more than before and I have shown some improvement in English because I can learn something that cannot be learned at school. (Student 15)

I like English more than before because this course is interesting. (Student 21)

The children became more interested in English because they found the course interesting and could learn something that could not be learned at school. Only a few of them (five children) mentioned that there was no difference in their interest in learning English and thought that the course could not arouse their interest to learn English.

4.2 Research question 2: What are the children’s perceptions of theme-based teaching?

The results of the post-course questionnaire showed that the children’s perceptions of the adoption of theme-based teaching are very positive. The majority of the children (86%, 84% and 86% respectively) agreed and strongly agreed that “Teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized” (Item 7), “Learning English becomes more meaningful” (Item 8), and “More vocabulary items around a certain theme can be learned” (Item 11) ($M=3.00$, 3.03 , and 3.15 respectively). Also, many children (77% and 75% respectively) agreed and strongly agreed with the items “Learning English becomes more interesting” (Item 9) and “Vocabulary items can be learned more easily” (Item 10) ($M=2.98$ and 2.89 respectively).

The children’s perceptions of theme-based teaching expressed in the interviews were also positive because theme-based teaching helped the children learn vocabulary and was more interesting than teaching English grammar only. This is evidenced by some of the children’s feedback:

I think it’s easier for us to understand a topic if theme-based teaching is adopted. It’s also easier to learn vocabulary because the vocabulary items are all related to the same theme. (Student 2)

We can learn more vocabulary about a particular theme because all the vocabulary items taught are within that particular theme. (Student 22)

It’s more fun to learn through themes. It will be very boring if we just learn English grammar. (Student 3)

In addition, the children could know more about certain themes. This can be gathered from the following feedback:

We know some interesting facts about the Olympics, for example, the total amount of money spent on

the Olympics and some famous sports stars. (Student 14)

Two children also mentioned that their language skills were enhanced by the adoption of theme-based teaching:

It helps me in writing and listening because I have learned more vocabulary. (Student 1 and Student 21)

4.3 Research question 3: What are the children's opinions of the themes chosen for the English course?

Regarding the children's opinions of the themes chosen, more than half of them (64%) agreed and strongly agreed that "The themes chosen for the English course suit my interest" (Item 13). On the other hand, 36% of them also disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. The mean score of this item is 2.80. Nevertheless, many children (76% and 73% respectively) agreed and strongly agreed that "The themes chosen for the English course are interesting" (Item 12) and "The themes chosen for the English course suit my English level" (Item 14) ($M=2.95$ and 2.83 respectively). Most of them (86%) also agreed and strongly agreed that "The themes chosen for the English course are relevant to my daily life" (Item 15) ($M=3.06$).

Though the findings of the questionnaires show that many children thought the themes chosen suit their English level, two of them mentioned in the semi-structured interviews that the level of the tasks is not suitable:

The themes chosen for this course are not quite suitable for us as P.4 and 5 students. The level of difficulty of the tasks is not high enough and so cannot arouse our interest to learn. We won't have great interest to learn something we have learnt before. (Student 9)

The themes are just the same as what we learned at schools. The materials are a bit easy. We feel very bored to learn something we have learnt before. (Student 12)

The feedback given by the tutors also illustrates that the themes chosen for the English course were interesting. However, in terms of the level, many of them thought that they were not so suitable for the children. Some examples of the tutors' feedback are as follows:

The themes (e.g. "The Olympics", "About me" and "Food") were interesting to most students as they were willing to share their personal experiences around these themes. Some of the themes, for example, "About me", were a bit easy for the students. The students appeared to be bored sometimes. (Tutor 1)

Overall speaking, most themes chosen for the English course suit the children's interest. However, my pupils believed that the tasks are not challenging enough. (Tutor 3)

Most of the themes are interesting, but the content and tasks in some themes may not suit the children's English level sometimes. (Tutor 5)

4.4 Research question 4: Among the different themes of the English course, which one do the children like most and why?

The children's preference for different themes varied. In ranking the themes chosen for the English course, 33% of the children ranked "Food" highest, followed by "The Olympics" (22%), "Fun places in Hong Kong" (21%) and "About me" (19%). Only 5% of them ranked "Transportation" highest.

The feedback given in the semi-structured interviews showed that whether the children like the theme or not is related to its level of difficulty in relation to their own level. For example:

I don't like "The Olympics" because there are too many vocabulary items and they are so difficult to

remember. (Student 3)

“About me” is too simple for us as P. 4 and 5 students. We learned that in P. 1. For “Fun places in Hong Kong”, more names of the places in Hong Kong should be introduced. In the theme “Olympics”, only those more common and easier names of sports activities such as basketball and football are introduced. I think other more difficult names of sports events like fencing, judo should be taught. (Student 9)

Moreover, the children like the themes that are relevant to their daily lives. For instance:

I think it’s good to teach “Olympics” because the Olympics is held in Beijing this year. (Student 9)

Nonetheless, the themes were less preferred if the content was similar to what they learned at school. This is evidenced by the following responses:

For the topic “Transportation”, we have learned the vocabulary in our textbooks already and it’s not necessary to cover it again. (Student 9)

I don’t like “Transportation” because we didn’t learn a lot of new vocabulary. Many vocabulary items have been taught before at our schools. (Student 22)

The course tutors also gave similar responses in the questionnaire that the children like themes that suit their level and are related to their daily lives. For example:

Some children complained that “About me” is too easy and they felt bored with this theme. (Tutor 11)
They (The children) are enthusiastic to learn something which is related to their daily life such as the names of fun places in Hong Kong. Also, the theme “Olympics” was introduced to the children in August. Since it was a hot topic in August, they found it very interesting. (Tutor 5)

One tutor suggested that the children’s preference for a certain theme is related to the number of vocabulary items introduced, whereas another tutor mentioned the use of activities and authentic teaching materials made the theme more enjoyable for the children:

The theme “Olympics” is interesting. However, most of the vocabularies in this theme are difficult for the children. Besides, too many vocabularies have to be introduced in this theme. (Tutor 5)

They (The children) like the theme “Food” best as they have a cooking lesson. The materials used are authentic which make them easier to understand (Tutor 9).

5 Discussion and implications for course design and implementation

The present study aims to investigate the learners’ perceptions and the impact of theme-based teaching on their levels of interests in an English course for primary ESL students in Hong Kong. This aim was achieved through the four research questions asked.

The first research question aimed to explore if the children became more interested in learning English after the English course. The results of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews show that the children involved in this study became slightly more interested in English and thought that learning English is fun, though the difference before and after the English course is not so significant, with only a slightly higher percentage of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the first four items of the post-course questionnaire. We should be cautious when we interpret the findings because of the unequal number of pre- and post-course questionnaires analyzed (74 and 65 pre- and post-course questionnaires). The children liked English more than before because they found the course interesting, with the tutors’ use of activities, and could learn something that could not be learned at their schools.

For the children’s perceptions of theme-based teaching which was answered in the second research question, it was found that the children in this study were very positive towards

theme-based teaching. The majority of them thought that teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized with the use of theme-based teaching. This aspect is in line with the rationale behind a thematic approach to learning that it makes teaching activities and materials more “structured, sequential, and well-organized” (Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks, 1995, p. 5). With the adoption of theme-based teaching, many children found learning English became more meaningful and interesting, and more vocabulary items centering around a certain theme could be learned easily. These findings support Cameron’s (2001) views that theme-based teaching provides learners with motivating and meaningful use of the language and that new vocabulary items can be learned easily, with the theme “providing support for understanding and recall” (p. 191). In fact, the theme-based teaching approach supports the retention of vocabulary as vocabulary items are presented in contexts and in associative ways, which is in agreement with how the human brain organizes and retains information because “words are organized semantically” in the human mental lexicon (McCarthy, 1990, p. 40).

The third research question sought information about the children’s opinions of the themes chosen for the English course. There are some differences between the results obtained through the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. In the questionnaires, many children perceived that the themes chosen for the English course are interesting and suit their English level. Additionally, most of them thought that the themes chosen are relevant to their daily lives. Nevertheless, in the interviews, some of the children expressed the view that the themes do not suit their level. With regard to the level, some tutors also said that the contents and tasks of some themes are not suitable for the children because they are too easy and not challenging enough.

Finally, the fourth research question of this study aimed to investigate which of the five themes chosen for the English course was liked most by the children and the reason for this. As the opinions given in the interviews reveal, whether the children like a certain theme or not is determined by its relevance to their daily lives. The importance of establishing a direct link between what students learn and their daily lives has been highlighted in some previous literature. Nunan (1988) suggests that “it is of vital importance to create as many links as possible between what happens in the classroom and what happens outside” (p. 115). Dörnyei (2001) emphasizes the importance of helping learners see the relevance of what they learn to their lives. If the teaching materials are relevant for the learners, it can become a motivational strategy. Meinbach, Rothlein and Fredericks (1995) also mention that those themes that concern the students directly and can capture their interest should be selected when we plan thematic instruction.

Of equal importance is the amount of new vocabulary items introduced in a theme and whether the theme suits the children’s level or not. Some children mentioned that they do not like a certain theme (e.g. The Olympics) because too many difficult vocabulary items were introduced, while some others indicated that the vocabulary items taught under certain themes (e.g. Transportation) had been learned before at their schools and that more new vocabulary items should be taught. Schmitt (2000) suggests that ten new words per one-hour session is a reasonable number of words to be taught in each class period.

Finally, children will like the theme if activities and authentic teaching materials are used. Activities that are interesting will make learners enjoy learning. For authentic texts, these are materials that are not written for the purpose of language teaching and learning (Jordan, 1997). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that authentic texts are preferable in order to increase learners’ motivation, though learners should be exposed to both authentic and non-authentic texts for different pedagogical purposes.

There are some limitations in the ‘Revive My Dreams Project’ English course that provide some implications for the planning of ESP courses in the future. The first limitation concerns the five themes chosen for the course. As mentioned above, the themes were all chosen and determined by the course tutors before the commencement of the course. Also, all the learning tasks and teaching materials used in the seven centres were the same, without considering the level, needs and interests of the course participants. Another weakness of the course is related to the way the children were streamed. Given the constraint of this English course that the participants went to different centres based on the districts of their residential addresses, differences in their language

level could not be catered to. As a result, within the same centre, some children found the tasks a bit easy, while others considered the teaching contents too difficult for them. An even more serious problem stems from the lack of an post-course evaluation, and therefore, its effectiveness (i.e. whether the objectives set could be achieved) cannot be assessed.

In future, due to the limitations in the course design in the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course, the planning of ESP courses, such as the course investigated in this study, should start by conducting a needs analysis in which the learners' current proficiency level and age are considered (Nunan, 1988). Those learners at a similar level should be grouped together in the same class, instead of placing the children according to their residential districts. Nunan (1988) believes that "effective language learning can only take place in classes that are relatively homogenous in terms of student proficiency level" (p. 47). To find out the current English level of the children, placement tests should be administered before the course begins (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The children's language level should then be considered when planning course materials and activities.

Apart from the children's proficiency level, their wants, needs, and interests should be identified. In selecting themes for a thematic course like the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course, one of the key considerations is to select themes that suit the students' interests (Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks, 1995). The themes 'Food', followed by 'The Olympics' and 'Fun places in Hong Kong' in this English course were of particular interest to the learners. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) also suggest that learners will be more motivated if their wants and needs are considered in their learning process. Furthermore, the level of difficulty of the learning tasks has to be considered.

Finally, evaluation has to be carried out at the end of the whole course. Nunan (1988) emphasizes the place of evaluation in a curriculum. With the component of evaluation, in the form of an end-of-course test, for example, we can assess whether the course objectives have been met or not (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

6 Conclusion

This paper presents a study which aimed to explore the impact of a theme-based English course for primary ESL children in a non-school setting in Hong Kong on learners' perceptions and level of interest in learning English. Most of the participants involved in the study agreed that teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized with the adoption of theme-based teaching. Also, English learning becomes more meaningful and vocabulary items can be learned easily as all the vocabulary items are related to the same theme. However, theme-based teaching as an approach will not automatically make learners become more interested in learning English, unless teachers are able to use interesting activities and suitable materials (e.g. authentic materials). The selection of themes and teaching materials for the English course and the grouping of learners are crucial as well. Those themes and tasks that suit the proficiency level, wants and needs of the learners, and are relevant to their daily lives should be selected. Information about the learners' preferences can be obtained through a needs analysis. Before the course begins, a placement test should be administered. Learners who have similar proficiency levels should be grouped together so as to facilitate the teaching and learning process. At the end of the course, some form of evaluation (e.g. in the form of a test) should be carried out to assess if the course objectives have been met.

The results of the current study inform educators in other contexts (e.g. in the school settings) that they should be aware of the fact that there are learner differences even within the same grade level or the same class. They should tailor-make the learning materials that suit the proficiency levels and interests of their own students. Students will also be intrinsically motivated to complete the learning tasks if they resemble what they are likely to encounter in real-life situations, or if they are given a certain degree of autonomy to choose the themes and the learning tasks for their language courses.

Notes

¹ The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme is designed to “provide a safety-net for individuals or families who cannot support themselves financially for various reasons such as old age, dis-ability, illness, unemployment and low earnings ... [It] provides financial assistance to bring the income of such individuals or families up to a prescribed level to meet their basic needs” (Census and Statistics Department, 2007, p. 2).

² The Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) is a charity organisation established in 1936 in Hong Kong, offering a wide range of services to children and youths. There are 62 service units serving various districts in Hong Kong. Their services include integrated services, camp services, pre-school education, small group homes, services for youths at risk, youth employment supportive services, family life education, school social work services, school support services, parent and children hotlines and counselling services etc.

³ The participants of the Revive My Dreams Project were selected by local schools, BGCA community centres and other non-government organisations based on the economic status of their families: CSSA, government textbook assistance scheme, government student travel subsidy scheme, or family monthly income lower than 55% of that of median household.

⁴ The content-based instructional (CBI) model includes three common approaches - theme-based, sheltered, and adjunct courses.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong, especially the officer of the Revive My Dreams Project, Miss Yeung Ho Yan Sindy, for providing great support in the research study. Additionally, I would like to thank all the course tutors and the participants of the ‘Revive My Dreams Project’ English Course. Without their cooperation, this study could not have been conducted smoothly. Finally, I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for reviewing my paper and giving me valuable comments on the earlier draft of this article.

References

- Alptekin, C., Erçetin, G., & Bayyurt, Y. (2007). The effectiveness of a theme-based syllabus for young L2 learners. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(1), 1–17.
- Berry, C.F., & Mindes, G. (1993). *Planning a theme-based curriculum: Goals, themes, activities, and planning guides for 4s and 5s*. Glenview, IL: Good Year Books.
- Brinton, D.M. (2001). A theme-based literature course: Focus on the city of angels. In J. Murphy & P. Byrd (Eds.), *Understanding the courses we teach: Local perspectives on English language teaching* (pp. 281–308). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Brinton, D.M., Snow, M.A., & Wesche, M. (2003). *Content-based second language instruction*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Brophy, J. (2004). *Motivating students to learn* (2nd ed). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Busch, M. (1993). Using Likert scales in L2 research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(4), 733–736.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Census and Statistics Department. (2007). *Hong Kong monthly digest of statistics: Statistics on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, 1996 to 2006*. Hong Kong: Government Printer. Retrieved July 28, 2008, from http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/products_and_services/products/publications/statistical_report/feature_articles/social_welfare/index_cd_B70707FA_dt_latest.jsp
- Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Deci, E.L. (1998). The relation of interest to motivation and human needs: The self-determination theory viewpoint. In L. Hoffmann, A. Krapp, K. Renninger & J. Baumert (Eds.), *Interest and learning: Proceedings of the Seeon Conference on Interest and Gender* (pp. 146–163). Kiel, Germany: IPN.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, D.E., & Freeman, Y.S. (2006). Teaching language through content themes: Viewing our world as a global village. In T.A. Young & N.L. Hadaway (Eds.), *Supporting the literacy development of English learners: Increasing success in all classrooms* (pp. 61–78). Newark, Del.: International Reading Association.
- Hidi, S. (2000). An interest researcher’s perspective: The effects of extrinsic and intrinsic factors on motivation. In C. Sansone & J.M. Harackiewicz (Eds.), *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: The search for optimal motivation and performance* (pp. 309–339). San Diego: Academic Press.

- Howe, D., Payne, K., Rohde, B., Spalding, G., Stein, L., & Whitbeck, D. (1991). *Teaching young children using themes*. Glenview, IL: Good Year Books.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learner-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jordan, R.R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirschner, M., & Wexler, C. (2002). Caravaggio: A design for an interdisciplinary content-based EAP/ESP unit. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 1*, 163–183.
- McCarthy, M. (1990). *Vocabulary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McMillan, J.H. (2000). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer* (3rd ed). New York: Longman.
- McMillan, J.H. (2004). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer* (4th ed). Boston, Mass.: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.
- Meinbach, A.M., Rothlein, L., & Fredericks, A.D. (1995). *The complete guide to thematic units: Creating the integrated curriculum*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gorden Publishers, Inc.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wesche, M.B., & Skehan, P. (2002). Communicative, task-based, and content-based language instruction. In R.B. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 207–228). New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Wiesen, B. (2000/2001). Content-based unit learning in English for Academic Purposes courses in teachers' colleges. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 44*(4), 372–381.

Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire about English language

This questionnaire aims to collect views about your perception towards English language. Please kindly spare some time and help me complete this questionnaire. All the information collected will be used for research purpose only and be kept confidential.

此問卷旨在收集閣下對英語的觀感。煩請閣下抽出一些寶貴時間完成此問卷。所得的資料只作研究之用途，絕對保密。

Section 1

Personal details

第一部分 個人資料

1. Level (Please tick):

年級：

P.1 小一

P.2 小二

P.3 小三

P.4 小四

P.5 小五

P.6 小六

2. Sex (Please tick):

性別：

Male 男

Female 女

3. Age (Please fill in):

年齡：

Section 2

Interest in English

第二部分 對英語之興趣

Please circle the number which best reflects your opinion on the following statements.

請圈出以下最能代表你個人意見的答案。

Interest in English 對英語之興趣	Strongly agree 極同意	Agree 同意	Disagree 不同意	Strongly disagree 極不同意
1. I like English. 我喜歡英語。	4	3	2	1
2. I like having English lessons. 我喜歡上英語課。	4	3	2	1
3. Learning English is fun. 學習英語是有趣的。	4	3	2	1
4. Having English lessons is fun. 上英語課是有趣的。	4	3	2	1
5. Learning English is satisfying. 學習英語是有滿足感的事情。	4	3	2	1

That's the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your kind help.
問卷完畢, 謝謝閣下之填寫

Appendix B: Questionnaire about English language and the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course

This questionnaire aims to collect views about your perception towards English language and the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course. Please kindly spare some time and help me complete this questionnaire. All the information collected will be used for research purpose only and be kept confidential.

此問卷旨在收集閣下對英語及童夢再生計劃英語課程的觀感。煩請閣下抽出一些寶貴時間完成此問卷。所得的資料只作研究之用途, 絕對保密。

Section 1 Personal details

第一部分 個人資料

1. Level (Please tick):

年級 :

P.1 小一

P.2 小二

P.3 小三

P.4 小四

P.5 小五

P.6 小六

2. Sex (Please tick):

性別 :

Male 男

Female 女

3. Age (Please fill in):

年齡 :

Section 2

第二部分

Please circle the number which best reflects your opinion on the following statements.

請圈出以下最能代表你個人意見的答案。

		Strongly agree 極同意	Agree 同意	Disagree 不同意	Strongly disagree 極不同意
1	I like English. 我喜歡英語。	4	3	2	1
2	I like having English lessons. 我喜歡上英語課。	4	3	2	1
3	Learning English is fun. 學習英語是有趣的。	4	3	2	1
4	Having English lessons is fun. 上英語課是有趣的。	4	3	2	1
5	Learning English is satisfying. 學習英語是有滿足感的事情。	4	3	2	1
6	After completing the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course, I like English more than before. 完成童夢再生計劃英語課程後，我較以前喜歡英語。	4	3	2	1
	Perceptions of theme-based teaching 對主題式教學的觀感				
7	Teaching activities and tasks are more integrated and organized. 教學活動較完整和有系統。	4	3	2	1
8	Learning English becomes more meaningful. 主題式教學使學習英語更有意義。	4	3	2	1
9	Learning English becomes more interesting. 主題式教學使學習英語更有趣。	4	3	2	1
10	Vocabulary items can be learned more easily. 主題式教學使學習英語詞匯變得容易。	4	3	2	1
11	More vocabulary items around a certain theme can be learned. 能學到更多與某主題相關的詞匯。	4	3	2	1
	Opinions of the themes chosen for the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course 對童夢再生計劃英語課程所選的主題 之意見				
12	The themes chosen for the English course are interesting. 課程所選的主題很有趣。	4	3	2	1
13	The themes chosen for the English course suit my interest. 課程所選的主題切合我的興趣。	4	3	2	1
14	The themes chosen for the English course suit my English level. 課程所選的主題切合我的英語程度。	4	3	2	1
15	The themes chosen for the English course are relevant to my daily life. 課程所選的主題非常生活化。	4	3	2	1

Section 3 第三部分

Please indicate your priorities by placing numbers in the boxes to indicate the ordering of the theme(s) chosen for the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course you like, 1 = the highest priority, 2 = the second highest, and so on.

依照你個人之喜歡程度，排列以下童夢再生計劃英語課程所選取的主題（1 = 最喜歡，2 = 次喜歡，如此類推）。

About me 自我介紹	<input type="checkbox"/>
Food 食物	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fun places in Hong Kong 香港的有趣地方	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transportation 交通	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Olympics 奧運會	<input type="checkbox"/>

Write down the reason(s) why you particularly like and/or dislike a certain theme chosen for the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course.

寫出你特別喜歡/不喜歡童夢再生計劃英語課程所選取的某個主題的原因。

That's the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your kind help.
問卷完畢，謝謝閣下之填寫

Appendix C

1. After completing the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course, do you like English / learning English more than before? Why?
完成童夢再生計劃英語課程後，你是否較以前喜歡英語/喜歡學習英語？為甚麼？
2. What do you think about the adoption of theme-based teaching in the English course? (meaningful, interesting, ...) If the English course is organized based on grammar items, do you think it is better than organizing the course based on themes? Why?
你對於採用主題式教學在英語課程有何意見？(有意義，有趣...) 對比於以文法結構作為課程的重點內容，你是否較喜歡？為甚麼？
3. What is your opinion about the themes chosen for the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course? (interesting, relevant to daily life, ...) Which one of the themes chosen for the English course do you like most? Why?
你對於童夢再生計劃英語課程中所選的主題有何意見？(有趣，生活化...) 你最喜歡的是哪個主題？為甚麼？

Appendix D: Questionnaire about the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course

This questionnaire aims to collect views about your observation of the children's response to the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course. Please kindly spare some time and help me complete this questionnaire. All the information collected will be used for research purpose only and be kept confidential.

Section 1 Personal details

1. Gender (Please tick):

Male

Female

2. Programme and year you are currently studying (*e.g. BEd(EL) Year 1*):

3. Your first language / mother tongue:

4. The BGCA centre you taught (Please circle):
Lok Man / Ma On Shan / Southern District / Yau Tong / Po Lam / Tsz Wan Shan / Tai Po

Section 2

Please feel free to write a few sentences about the following questions.

5. Do you think the children enjoy the 'Revive My Dreams Project' English course? Why?
6. Do you think the themes chosen for the English course suit the children's interest? Why?
7. Do you think the themes chosen for the English course suit the children's English level? Why?

That's the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your kind help.