

# Integrating English into an Elementary School Life Course

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Integrating English and content instruction has become a popular option for ESL and EFL instructors. The technique focuses not only on learning English, but also on using English as a medium to learn mathematics, science, social studies, or other academic subjects. This paper is a study on integration of English into the second-grade Life Course in a rural elementary school in Taiwan.

## Introduction

English has been taught to the fifth graders in Taiwan since the fall semester of 2001. In Taipei County, second graders in eleven elementary schools began to take an English course once or twice a week in the fall semester of 2002. Unfortunately, elementary school English education in any grade is hampered by a limited number of class hours per week.

An integrated curriculum is one of the characteristics of the nine-year curriculum promoted by the Ministry of Education in the past two years. In fact, integrating English with other content subjects has been trendy in the West for years. Content-based ESL is a method that integrates ESL instruction with subject matter instruction. This language teaching approach aims not only to teach the language as a subject, but also to use the target language as a medium for learning academic subjects.

"Miss Chien, are we going to have an English or Life Course?" asked an 8-year-old girl. The girl's question forced the researcher to ponder how a language teacher could teach the Life Course differently from a homeroom teacher. The task was how to integrate English into the Life Course, so the students would learn English as well as the core concepts. Having been assigned to teach a Life Course to second graders in a rural elementary school in Taipei County, the researcher decided to attempt to do just that.

This paper aims to discuss the following five issues.

- What were students' attitudes toward their English teacher being their Life Course teacher?
- What were the differences between the English teacher's instruction and the homeroom teacher's instruction in the Life course?
- What English would students recall after integrating English into the Life Course?
- What were some challenges faced by the language teacher while teaching the Life course in Taiwan?
- What and how can English be integrated into the Life Course or other subjects?

## Literature

Integrated English and content instruction has become a popular option of traditional ESL or EFL instruction. Advocates of this approach believe that a language can be learned effectively when it is the medium of instruction, rather than as just a subject. Based on this belief, integrated English and content instruction is a method that integrates English with subject matter instruction. The technique focuses not only on learning English, but also using English as a medium to learn mathematics, science, social studies, and other academic subjects. (Crandall 1987, Crandall 1998, Genesee, 1994, Reilley, 1988, Snow 1989, Short 1991, Short 1993, Taylor 1983)

Integrated English and content instruction has many benefits. First of all, language acquisition is based on input that is meaningful and understandable to the learner. Such integration increases students' interests with content themes, and therefore, it also provides a meaningful basis for understanding and acquiring new language structures and patterns. (Genesee, 1994, Krashen, 1989, Snow 1989, Taylor, 1983). Second, language, cognition and social skills develop concurrently among young learners. Language is a crucial

medium that social and cognitive development proceeds (Genesee, 1994). By learning core subjects in English-, learners can obtain core concepts and develop social skills. Third, the integration of English and content instruction emphasizes the specificity of functional language use. (Genesee, 1994)

When integrating English and content instruction, Short (1991) specifies teachers can adjust their teaching style with such things as developing a student-centered approach to teaching and learning, reducing and adjusting teacher talk as well as recognizing the fact that students make language mistakes. Furthermore, Short (1991) recommends ways to teach multilevel classes such as using cooperative learning, incorporating peer tutoring, designing lessons for students' discovery learning, and including information gap activities. Short (1991) also urges teachers to adapt traditional English teaching techniques into the content classroom such as including music and jazz chant activities, having students do hand-on activities, doing demonstrations, bringing realia into the class, using films or videotapes, supplementary books, etc. As for evaluating students' comprehension of the content instruction, alternative assessments are recommended such as dialogue journals, role-playing, or portfolio.

## Methods

There were 26 students in Class 2C in Chung-Hu Elementary School in Taipei County. The number of boys and girls was equal. The students' ages ranged from 7 to 9. The Life Course was composed of science, social studies, art and music. Students took seven classes in a Life Course per week and each class period was forty minutes. I was responsible for only three of these seven classes. The selected textbook was published by Nan-Yi Publisher and was accompanied by teaching aids and a student's workbook. The textbook was divided into three major themes: my family, happy gathering and beautiful life. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire survey (see Appendix I) was conducted. Two students were absent when the questionnaire was conducted.

## Analysis

As for the question, "How do you feel when the English teacher is also your Life Course teacher?" Twenty students responded that they "liked the teacher very much" or "liked the teacher," while three students replied, "OK," and one answered with "disliked the teacher." Therefore, most students held a positive attitude toward the fact that their English teacher was also their instructor of the Life Course.

"The English teacher makes the Life Course fun and interesting" was the top reason why students enjoyed having their English teacher as their Life Course teacher, followed by "The teacher was gentle"(five students), "play games" (three students), "The teacher is kind to us" (two students).

In terms of difference of the instruction given by English teacher and homeroom teacher, "The English teacher will teach English" ranked number one (twenty-two students), followed by "The English teacher designs activities and games in class" (twenty-one student), "Commands are given in English" (sixteen students), "The English teacher gives us chances for discussion and sharing ideas" (fourteen students), and "The English teacher explains more explicitly"(ten students).

What English could students recall after the teacher integrated English into the Life Course? The story Three Little Pigs was on the top list (14), followed by terms of family members (6), yo-yo (6), book (5), pencil (3), duck (2) and numbers (2). When introducing the structure of the house, the story Three Little Pigs was told. Yo-yo was one of the toys students came up while they discussed "What's your favorite toy?" "Book" and "pencil" were classroom English and students often heard the commands "Open your book" and "Take out your pencil." In class, the teacher often led the students into counting the scores after games or competitions. "Duck" was mentioned in the theme "Animals in your neighborhood." "Family members" were introduced in English under the title "My family."

There were four major challenges English teacher faced in teaching the Life Course.

- Local publishers provided insufficient teaching materials for integrating English into a Life Course. Chinese, rather than English was the medium in the Life Course. The teaching procedures, ideas, activities, resources in the teacher's manuals were Chinese-oriented. Therefore, teachers would have to spend extra time and effort searching for materials for integrating English into the Life Course.
- The lack of cooperative teaching teams was another big challenge. The second graders in Chung-Hu elementary school had three classes. The Life Course in one class was taught by an English teacher and the rest were taught by their homeroom

teachers. The homeroom teachers felt reluctant to integrate English into the Life Course because English is the biggest stumbling block for them.

- The limited class period was a problem. There were seven class periods for the Life Course per week, but the researcher was responsible for only three periods. It was a task to complete a theme-based lesson into three class periods in a week.
- There was a limitation on the content of the assessment. The mid-term and final exam papers were designed for all the second graders. English couldn't be included in the test since English was integrated into only one class. This limitation lowered the efficiency of integrating English into the Life Course and assessing students' learning.

What and how can teachers integrate English into the Life Course or other subjects?

- Classroom commands such as "Stand up" or "Sit down" or "Open your book to page\_\_." Can be included in English.
- Theme-based vocabulary, phrases or sentences can be introduced. Take the theme "family helper" as an example. Phrases such as "sweep the floor," "wash the dishes," or "take out the garbage" can be introduced.
- English songs or picture books can be taught in a Life Course. The True Stories of Three Pigs by Jon Scieszka and *Me and My Family Tree* by Joan Sweeney can be used as supplementary materials for the theme "house structure" and "my family" respectively.
- ESL activities or games such as Simon says, role-play, information gap, etc. can make the Life Course more interesting. For example, students can do actions as the teacher gives commands such as "Simon says, 'Sweep the floor.'"

## Conclusion

This study indicated that eighty-three percent of students held positive attitudes toward the fact that their English teacher was also their Life Course instructor. Students seemed to enjoy the variety of activities and theme-based instruction in the Life Course designed by the English teacher. Integrating English into Life Course should be done because it provides motivation for students to learn better.

There are ways for teachers to effectively integrate English into the Life Course. First of all, numerous Web sites (see Appendix I) provide lesson plans, activities or worksheets for teachers. Teachers can adapt-lessons, activities or worksheets on the Web sites. Second, teachers who teach the same grades should work cooperatively in lesson planning. English teachers can introduce key words to students in English classes in advance. English becomes the medium for the Life Course teachers to introduce core concepts. By doing so, students will benefit from learning both English and core concepts in integrating English and the Life Courses.

## Issues for Further Research

Several areas still need to be investigated in order to more completely understand the effects of integrating English and content instruction. One area that needs to be addressed concerns parents', other subjects teachers' and homeroom teachers' attitude toward and perception of the importance of integrating English into content instruction. Why? How will this contribute? Another area is how to overcome teachers' reluctance to use English when teaching core subjects. How might their feelings of inadequacy be conquered?

This research focuses only on a case study in an elementary school in a rural area. Another study should be conducted with more students at different ages and with different English proficiency levels. Is there any difference regarding integrating English among first or second graders to third or fourth graders, or even fifth and sixth graders? Again, when you introduce a direction for a further study, talk about why this would be important.

A final issue that needs research is the relationship between English and other content instruction. To what extent can English help students learn to other core concepts? Again, when you introduce a direction for a further study, talk about why this would be important.

## Reference

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## Appendix - Useful Web Sites

- ABC Teach <http://www.abcteach.com/>
- Ask ERIC <http://www.askeric.org>
- Education Place <http://www.eduplace.com/main.html>
- Elementary and Middle School Teachers' Resources <http://www.sabine.k12.la.us/vrschool/elemtry.htm>
- Enchanted Learning <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/Home.html>
- Primary Games Com <http://www.primarygames.com/default.htm>
- Resources for Educators <http://www.globalclassroom.org/resource.html>
- TeacherNet <http://www.teachnet.com/lesson/>
- Teachers Help Teachers <http://www.pacificnet.net/~mandel/>

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<http://iteslj.org/>

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<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Chien-Integrating.html>