A Hybrid Curriculum Framework for Developing Content, Sequence and Methodology in the Saudi EFL Context

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Abstract

English is the dominant language of international communication. Therefore, language teachers worldwide use several language teaching methods and curriculum design approaches to create a learning environment that promotes significant and continuous improvements in their students' language proficiencies. However, many of these teaching methodologies and curriculum content designs may not always be suitable and effective across every EFL teaching and learning setting. To this end, this paper takes into consideration such concern and advocates the use of a specific framework for developing a hybrid curriculum specifically designed for EFL students enrolled in the preparatory year at Jazan university. The aim is to meet students' immediate needs and common interests of using their L2 meaningfully and purposefully inside and outside the university settings. The framework is built around thematic and text-based content in addition to the ESL integrated skill textbook currently used by teachers. This course outline may inform Saudi language policymakers about adopting a hybrid curriculum that also involves instructional themes that address students' immediate needs and, therefore, gives them a motive to use L2 in real-life contexts.

Keywords: hybrid curriculum, thematic/text-based content, needs analysis, framework

1. Introduction

This curriculum development project has been designed as a model for those teaching general English in the preparatory year at Jazan University. This project aims at providing a framework for teachers to use that will help them better serve the immediate language learning needs of the students and their interests. Often teachers in these types of programs use similar textbooks that teach the four basic skills (Listening-speaking) & (reading -writing). Grammar and vocabulary activities are embedded in these integrated textbooks. This integrated-based skill syllabus is used in the first year at Saudi universities for all students regardless of the different colleges in which they intend to pursue their degree course. This paper, therefore, develops a course outline that could serve as a starting point for teachers and curriculum developers to tailor pedagogy for a hybrid curriculum based on the immediate needs and interests of their specific students.

2. Literature Review

Thematic-based content proposed in the present framework is one model of content-based instructions (CBI) and was described by Met (1999) as the syllabus in which "the teacher selects a theme from which language outcomes are to be realized" (p. 8). Haas (2000) stated that "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." (p.2). Brown (2001) also suggested that using theme-based content is effective for EFL learners as it promotes automaticity, meaningful learning, and intrinsic motivation. Brown (2001) pointed out that thematic-based instructions "put principles of effective learning into action" (p. 236). Its flexibility of use in a content-driven curriculum makes it the most adopted form of content-based syllabus. (Brinton, 2007). Another reason for the success of a theme-based syllabus in the EFL context is the fact that it considers students' background knowledge. Thus, students have background information about the topics to be taught (Genesee,1994, Lung,1999; Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989). Crandall (1987) found that adopting a theme guarantees relevancy, emphasizes learning processes, integrates units, and fosters "higher order" thinking. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1993) emphasized that "thematic units will help overcome the problems with fragmentation in the curriculum, help students see the interrelationships among various ways of knowing, and provide "meaningful, conceptually and experientially rich ... explorations" (p. 106).

The second component of the proposed hybrid curriculum is a text-based syllabus which is expected to provide a unified, meaningful and purposeful natural language. A text-based syllabus is an approach that teaches students how language functions in an immediate context in which it is used in relation to the typical cultural environment. (Crystal, 1992; Feez, 1998; Hailong, 1991; Halliday, 1985; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Tingting, 2011). Richards and Schmidt (2010) pointed out that a text-based integrated approach is "a methodology that focuses on teaching explicitly about the features of spoken and written texts and links to the cultural context of their use" (p.604).

Thornbury (2005) explained that language occurs not as isolated words and sentences but rather as spoken or written texts.

The above authentic content design will complement the current ESL integrated skill textbook used to teach students in their preparatory year. Thematic and text-based instructions will lend themselves easily to the teaching of the four skills featured in the integrated skills textbook (Brinton, 2007; Brinton& Snow, 2017; Early, 2001; Mohan, 1986; Reynolds, 2015; Valeo, 2013).

3. Steps for Developing the Hybrid Curriculum

3.1 Parameters for the Teaching Situations

This curriculum project targets intermediate-level university students enrolled in level one of the preparatory year at Jazan University. The students range in age from 18-22 and will join different Colleges upon completion of the preparatory year. All students majoring in different fields of specialization have started learning English at the preparatory level as instructed by the Ministry of Education. The framework is only designed to be implemented in the first semester of the preparatory year.

Some studies claimed that Saudi students lack motivation as shown by the learning outcomes of EFL programs in KSA (Al-Khairy, 2013; Aldosari, 2014; Elyas & Picard, 2012). However, it has been observed that first-year students at Jazan university are motivated and have great expectations of learning English in their preparatory year. Students' motivations stem from their desire to find better employment opportunities after they graduate. It has been also observed that many university students are motivated by their interest to make successful interactions with other Saudis and non-Saudis in many domains, such as in international schools and higher education, workplace, publications, research projects, tourism, entertainment, social media and companies, banks, airports, tourism agencies, and other settings.

The claim that motivation is a reason for such poor outcomes in EFL Saudi programs may not be as convincing as it is for why Saudi students lack motivation in the first place. The researcher thinks that it could be that ESL textbooks may not fit into students' immediate needs and expectations of learning L2. Therefore, this paper advocates the need for a more sophisticated teaching framework for curriculum development that qualifies Saudi students to use English with respect to their immediate needs, varying specializations and interests in communicating in L2 in situations that require the use of English. This framework should keep students motivated throughout their L2 courses. It will incorporate real-life situations in instruction and foster students to practice experiential learning. As Masgoret and Gardner (2003) suggested that motivated learners are willing to exert more effort, take responsibility for their learning, have goals to achieve, desires to fulfill, enjoy the process of learning and use whatever strategies available to succeed. Further, a modernized curriculum should also account for the needs of the 21st century intercultural communication that has been proposed in the vision of 2030 of Saudi Arabia.

In the current EFL situation, teachers have varied ESL texts available to them for use in the different colleagues they are assigned. For instance, the ESL textbook used to teach students majoring in medical college has different content from the one used to teach students majoring in engineering college. Hence, teachers are required to teach particular textbooks selected by the teaching and learning unit at the University English Language Institute for each class they teach. Teachers also have a copy machine available to them. Each classroom includes 2 large whiteboards and an overhead projector and a smartboard. Students, with regard to their intended major, may have 6 to 12 contact hours a week of learning English. All classes must incorporate the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking via the use of an integrated ESL textbook.

3.2 Needs Analyses

3.2.1 Global Needs Analysis

According to the above information, at least two components exist within the preparatory year-specific English classes: 1) Most students have similar English proficiency levels, and 2) Most students are motivated and that could lead to authentic classroom discussions while incorporating all four skills communicatively. For the reasons that lie behind the need for more updated curricula and since almost all students are currently connected with the world and with each other via social media, it is convincing to speculate that they will also have many common English language needs. The purpose of the need analysis will, therefore, be to determine what the most immediate needs are of the students as a whole so that the syllabus can be developed around those needs.

Procedures to be used to conduct a needs analysis are to first ask students to fill out a form in which they provide their teachers with the situations they think *using English* is useful for them (See Appendix A). The form is divided into three columns to help students organize their thoughts and to allow their teachers to later organize the situations into categories. The purpose of the above need analysis procedure would be to allow the students to think about and determine how much and in what different situations they need or will need to use English. In addition, this form would provide information that could lead to a practical framework for developing the class curriculum and/or additional materials.

Another form requires students to imagine that they can speak "perfect" English and then fill out the form describing situations that they would imagine themselves communicating in as if they had no language limitations (See Appendix B). The results of this form will serve to complement the results obtained from the previous form and will be organized similarly.

Such design of a hybrid curriculum may not be perfect in its initial form. Therefore, teachers should be prepared to make significant revisions after the first lessons were taught. Teachers can follow up in later classes by carrying out informal assessments of students.

These assessments may include interviewing students individually, observing their oral language needs during small and large group activities, and collecting samples of their written texts to analyze them according to grammatical and lexical needs.

However, students may find it difficult to come up with the situations and/or have difficulty explaining the situations in English. This type of problem could be minimized by providing students with examples of real-life situations. The students can also discuss the forms in small groups and then teachers can give students a chance to add to their lists. Allowing students to discuss the situations with their classmates could help them think of other situations that they had not thought of on their own.

3.2.2 Situational Analysis

A situational analysis is usually used to identify key factors that may positively or/and negatively affect curriculum development and implementation (Richards, 2001). The SWOT format can be used to identify these positive and negative factors. SWOT can be defined as, "a language program's internal *strengths* and *weaknesses* in addition to external *opportunities*, and *threats* to the existence or successful operation of the language program" (Klinghammer, 1997, p. 65).

The major strength of this curriculum design is that the syllabus design addresses the immediate needs and interests of the students. However, the limitation is that instructors should wait until they identify what those needs are through the implementation of needs analysis on the first week of class. Ongoing needs analyses will also be administered throughout the course to determine students' needs. Thematic and text-based units will, therefore, be developed in response to the ongoing needs analyses.

Although this type of delay in planning may be most beneficial for student learning in the long run, it could cause particular concerns and uncertainty for the administration and the instructors as well. However, this type of problem in this proposed curriculum is expected to be minor. This is because teachers will continue the use of the ESL textbook endorsed by the administration as the framework for their syllabus design. Therefore, teachers and administrators can avoid the uncertainties and the delay that could arise with the student-centered proposed curriculum.

Factors related to teachers' philosophies on teaching must also be considered. The idea of creating thematic and text-based content to be used in addition to the textbooks used by teachers could be challenging. It could also be viewed as a burden and as such there should be clear-cut explanations for the reasons and aims behind using a particular content-based design. Teachers' support out of their own desire to participate is useful and will in turn lead to more effective syllabus design and effectively tailored instructions. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) pointed out that the teacher is the "content specialist" in such a content-based design.

Engaging administrators and other stakeholders, involved in the decision-making process, will provide support for the long-term success and sustainability of the proposed curriculum. For instance, equipping classes with tools of communication technology in the class offers access to a set of electronic facilities such as interactive video, the internet, email, the World Wide Web, blogs, podcasts, and CALL software. The use of ICT in the class is empowering since it will enable students to have access to new ways of communicating common in today's society. Many studies have claimed that the use of ICT increases students' motivation and positive attitudes, attention, promotes research and cooperative learning and total engagement in the language classroom (Blake, 2008; Cowie & Jones, 2009; Rank, Warren, & Millum 2011; Tindall, 2013). Further, administrators may plan and organize orientation workshops for teachers new to the concept of thematic and text-based content and help remind experienced teachers of its benefits and strategies to overcome its challenges.

Students will also have opportunities to get involved in the construction of knowledge and content of the syllabus through their reflections and feedback. These types of opportunities can help build the bridges needed for social, personal, professional and linguistic development on the part of students and teachers as well.

3.2.3 Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this thematic and text-based EFL class is to meet the immediate language needs of the students. To determine these needs, students are asked to fill out two needs analyses forms during week one of the course. The sustainable and later ongoing informal assessment information supplemented by the needs analysis will reinforce and support the accomplishment of the proposed goals for the proposed thematic and text-based content to be operationalized into a hybrid curriculum including the ESL textbook used currently by teachers.

Goal 1: Understanding main ideas and key points of thematic and authentic texts that match their actual level

Objectives:

- Students will enhance their comprehension of textual content and improve their language skills.
- Students will summarize, explain, or paraphrase newspaper, magazine articles, and website texts.
- Students will compose and organize formal/informal written compositions, emails, text messages, essay compositions and academic writing.
- Students will develop their understanding of texts by increasing the connection between reading materials and real life.
- Students will further develop multiple skills simultaneously, just as in the real world

Goal 2: Taking advantage of opportunities and choices in life by developing strategies needed to be autonomous in their English language learning.

Objectives:

- Students will take initiative to improve their language proficiency by keeping a daily journal. They will record the situations in which they interact in English face-to-face or online.
- Learners will take initiative to improve their language proficiency by writing down new vocabulary items, on a daily basis, that they deem as important.
- Students will develop their ability to seek out information regarding their immediate personal and social needs by using the internet, newspapers, mobiles, and face-to-face interaction.
- Students will develop aural/oral fluency by asking questions and sharing their feedback.

Goal 3: Developing a greater understanding and appreciation for different communicative situations.

Objectives

- Students will gain a better awareness of the social and recreational opportunities using the target language.
- Students will create initiatives and engage in community services (e.g., English classes at schools).
- Students will use technology tools to record and report local events using the target language.
- Students will learn to socialize with their peers and teachers to improve their communicative skills

Goal 4: Using different interactional and strategic practices.

Objectives

- Students will use many formulaic expressions to express their wants and desires, likes and dislikes, preference, hope, intentions, personal goals, etc.
- Students will use non-verbal cues to signal understanding/non-understanding (e.g., gestures, eye contact, facial expressions).
- Students will use different tones to indicate their feelings and attitudes. (grammatical-accentual and attitudinal).
- Students will negotiate the exchange of information.
- Students will maintain the topic of discussion at hand.
- Students will use discourse conversational features (e.g., formulaic expressions, fillers, etc.).
- Students will ask for clarification and confirmation of understanding.

3.2.4 Syllabus Framework and Course Content

The proposed thematic and text-based framework chosen to be designed is additional to the existing curriculum in the preparatory year, which is an ESL integrated skill-based textbook. Both theme and text-based instructions are tailored to suit the students' immediate needs and interests. Determining the interest of students prior to the selection and designing of the course content will more likely increase student motivation and enthusiasm for the class (Stoller, 1999). For this reason, the topic of "Life on campus" can be the starting point in the hybrid curriculum design. Some of the benefits of using thematic content include the following:

- Making language more meaningful.
- Addressing the needs of students through topics related to their interests
- Motivating students and creating positive attitudes
- Providing a natural link to introduce authentic materials
- Drawing on connections from the real world and life experiences
- Integrating the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking into the curriculum (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Stryker & Leaves, 1997; Mohan, 1986, Richards, 2001).

In addition to the thematic-based component of the syllabus, the class will be broken down further according to the content that is included in the texts selected for the class, which is important in creating cohesion in the curriculum (Stoller, 1999). The large portion of texts chosen will be authentic and obtained from websites of different international entities, such as Saudi international banks, tourist agencies, hospitals, hotels, etc., and including written texts such as newsletters, community services reports, event calendars, handbooks, etc. Recorded lectures of university teachers of English will also be used. Other texts will include video clips, written texts chosen or created by the teacher, and advanced student-generated texts such as role plays and essay writing.

The existing integrated-skills textbook will not only complement the thematic and text-based content but is beneficial for many reasons. Increasing one's ability in each of the four skills will likely lead to higher levels of autonomous language learning and competent proficiency in the target language. Also, learners will need to comprehend both written and spoken input they receive from the developed themes and selected spoken and written authentic texts. For instance, to initiate written contact with teachers, or other administrators, learners will need to write notes, messages, and e-mails along with interacting in face-to-face conversations. It must also be emphasized

that each of the four skills can complement and build on the learning of the other skills. For example, improved listening skills can lead to better oral production and improved reading skills can benefit written production. In addition, written texts selected from the surrounding registers can be used later in discussion activities. Discussion activities can also be used as a way of brainstorming about issues that students will write about. Similarly, aural or written texts can provide interesting and useful content for discussion or written activities. Using an integrated skills syllabus provides more diversity for ways of recycling the thematic and text-based material that is interesting to the students and can lead to accelerated learners' language proficiency.

3.2.5 Materials Development/Sample Lesson Plans

To better illustrate how the program goals and course objectives will be met through this curriculum, a sample lesson has been included (see Appendix C). This sample lesson represents the first lesson to be taught in unit one *"Life on Campus".* This lesson aims at educating the students about their future environments and the different services provided to them. The content of this lesson is a recording of the orientation welcoming program for freshmen delivered by the dean of the English Language Institute at Jazan university. During the warm-up activity, the class will discuss how universities can be environments for change, and examples of this will be written on the board. All the activities in the lesson plan feature thematic and text-based content with integrated skills built around them. Through this activity, students will read, write, and talk about informative aspects of the dean's speech, such as programs, classes, extra-curricular activities, services, using English with teachers and peers, etc. In activity one, the students will listen and then work on a true/false activity. This activity will provide students with the opportunity to practice the key language objective of listening and understanding key information and will also build their confidence in listening comprehension. Listening and understanding is an important language skill during their classes, and it is fundamental to their success at the university, therefore sufficient listening opportunities are essential. In activity two, the students, arranged in groups of three or four, will analyze the text adopted from the university website, explain their interpretations to the class, and write a brief summary of the text. The objectives of reading beyond the word level, explaining, and summarizing will be met during this activity (see Goals and Objectives above).

In the homework assignment of the sample lesson, students are asked to write a response to what they think is the most important information in the dean's speech and to explain why. Keeping in mind that what is important to students is essential in keeping the learning processes featuring a student-centered syllabus. It also requires the teacher to be flexible and guides him/her in the development of further lessons, which is essential in this type of syllabus.

4. Conclusion

Developing a content-based course featuring thematic, text-based content is a challenging and time-consuming task for any curriculum developer. Establishing where the course or language program will fit along the content with language learning and how to balance language and content within should be the first step in this effort exerted by all in charge. Defining this first step allows teachers to then identify and address the challenges common to most content-based programs, such as the varying levels of language proficiencies of students and varying degrees of teachers' prior knowledge of the content-based curriculum.

Another area of potential challenge for this class is the amount of practice the students are getting regarding the four skills. In a university setting, a student has to utilize the four skills nearly every day, therefore, it is the teachers' job to ensure students are getting adequate practice with these skills. Upon posing such concern, a host of related questions arise:

- What types of activities are the students undertaking?
- What skills do these activities involve?
- Who is benefiting/not benefiting from the activities? Why? Why not?
- Which activities are being used the most/the least?
- How is the pacing? Do teachers need to spend more time on certain language aspects?
- Are all of the goals and objectives of the course being addressed?
- Do the goals and objectives lead to better learning outcomes?
- Is the assessment fair? Does it provide precise information on students' actual performance?

To conclude, lessons should be written clearly and consistently including reference information so that teachers with less knowledge of thematic and text contents can feel confident when presenting the curriculum to their students. Further, curriculum instructors should gather as much student and teacher feedback as possible to assist in the ongoing revision of the curriculum design, content, and sequence. Finally, administrators should also take appropriate actions to ease workloads as well as guarantee the maximum logistical and administrative support to the curriculum designers and teachers.

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Appendix A

Needs Analysis #1

In which situations is using English useful for you? Check your answer with the mark (✓).

	Very useful	Useful	Not useful
1. Talking to friends.			
2. Talking to teachers.			
3. Talking to native speakers.			
4. Talking to tourists.			
5. Talking to neighbors.			
6. Talking in the phone.			
7. Teaching in an English classroom.			
8. Answering questions orally in the classroom.			
9. Asking questions orally in the classroom.			
10. Presenting in the classroom.			
11. Passing an oral interview at the end of a speaking course.			
12. Having a discussion with your classmates.			
13. Working in a hotel.			
14. Working in a tourist agency.			
15. Working in a private company.			
16. Working in a hospital			
17. Working in a bank			
18. Working in an airport			
19. Working in the Saudi English FM radio station			
20. Other (please specify)			

Appendix B

Needs Analysis #2

Imagine that you speak "perfect" English. In what situations would you use your English? Fill in the following chart to describe those situations.

Where would you go?	Who would you speak to?	What would you talk about?	What could we practice in class to help you reach this goal?

Appendix C

Lesson Plan I

Brief description of classroom setting: EFL classroom in the preparatory year at Jazan university. Thematic -/text-based syllabus. Intermediate-level students.

Pre-lesson inventory

Overview of lesson goals: By the end of this lesson, students will…

learn to listen for specific details

learn to analyze imaginative writing

learn how to go beyond word-level meaning

be able to summarize information

Materials to take to class: A video recording of the opening welcoming of freshmen conducted by the dean of ELI - written text taken from the university website covering the event (See appendix E)

Equipment needed for class: smartboard.

Assignments to collect from students: Hand in lists of English words with synonyms.

Special room arrangements: None

Warm-up: Pre-listening exercise (an excerpt of listening series of 5 minutes on "life on campus" at Jazan University)

Purpose: To connect upcoming activities to the theme of the unit (Life on campus)

To generate ideas related to the upcoming activity

Procedures:

1. Tell students: "Universities can be environments for change, can you think of any examples of how this might be?"
2. Write examples on the board—"How could these things positively affect the university and/or students?"
3. Tell students: "Now we are going to hear the dean talking about how the university can be an environment for change, and the unfortunate results of this particular incident."

Activity 1: Listening activity/fill-in-the-blank exercise (20 minutes)

Purpose: To provide students with the opportunity to listen for details;

To build confidence in listening comprehension

Procedures:

1. Hand out a transcription of the dean's speech with deleted words.
2. Have the class read over words by themselves.
   a. Ask if there are any vocabulary questions, if so, write meanings on the board.

3. Play the recording
   a. Students fill in the blanks that they can.
4. Play the recording again
   a. Students fill in the remaining blanks. If there are any words they could not get, write them on the board.
5. Students read over the transcription again.

Activity 2: Analysis of written text and explanation to class (25 minutes)

Purpose: To practice reading beyond word level

    To practice the ability to explain in English

    To summarize the written text.

Procedures:
1. Ask students to form groups of three or four.
2. After discussing the meaning with each other, groups take turns explaining their interpretation of the text to the class.
3. Students write a brief summary of the text, individually.

Closure/cool down (8-10 minutes)

Purpose: To connect this speech event to one that happened at another Saudi university

    To compare and contrast

    To prepare them for their homework assignment

1. Ask students "What are the similarities/differences between the two events?"

HW assignment:
1. Identify a couple of additional words or phrases that you did not understand.
2. Summarize the university website text into one coherent paragraph.

Backup activity (variable time)

Purpose: To make use of all class time

    To generate class discussion

Procedures:
1. "Why do you think it was written?"
2. "Do you think this kind of information is important, why?"

Appendix D

With the start of the first day of the academic year 1444 AH - 2023 AD, the English Language Institute held a welcome program for its new students. The program was divided into two parts, in-person and remote, to achieve maximum benefit. The first part of the program was an overall introduction to life on campus. The second part aimed to introduce the student to electronic services and the university's electronic systems and how to benefit from them. The program was opened with verses from the Holy Quran followed by several paragraphs to introduce Jazan University and its colleges, as well as the applied colleges.

After that, His Excellency the Dean of the ELI, spoke to the new students, welcoming them and encouraging them to do their best in achieving knowledge and equipping themselves with the necessary skills beneficial for their future endeavors. He also wished them a career full of achievements and successes. After that, several programs and activities that the student can engage in and benefit from were introduced. Finally, the list of student rights and duties at Jazan University was reviewed. An introductory tour was also made for the students around the college facilities.