

## The Use of the Integrated Thematic Instruction Model (ITIM) in English Education in Taiwan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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With the rapid changes in all parts of society, change in the Taiwanese university education is inevitable, especially in English education. As students play a key role in the change process; it is important to understand their attitudes for English learning and their desire for the change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, the attitudes of university students toward integrated thematic language learning are also crucial in the process of change.

In this study, the researchers worked as a team to integrate interdisciplinary contents into the unified thematic units in their Freshman English courses. The key conception of the design of these units was based on “holistic education” (i.e. “whole person education.”) The curriculum design of these English courses was then organized into: (1) Contemporary Ethics Units – including “gender difference,” “dating ethics,” and “interpersonal relationship ethics,” (2) Social Concern Units – including “learning with immersion,” “environmental ethics,” and “caring for the disadvantages.”

This study had multiple purposes, which were as follows: (1) to determine the attitudes of Freshman English students who had Integrated Thematic Instruction Model (ITIM) being applied into their classes; (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of ITIM used in a Freshman English setting from students' perspectives; (3) to describe the feedbacks from participating students.

In the beginning of Fall 2001, a self – developed survey questionnaire was constructed to study the learning backgrounds of 99 university Freshman. For example, questions such as “How much time do you spend on learning English every day?” “How do you describe your motivation in terms of learning English?” were asked and then analyzed. At the end of Spring 2002, a 5-item university-developed “Teaching Effectiveness Opinionnaire” was distributed to these students; meanwhile, another self-developed 3-item questionnaire was addressed to the same group of students to study on their satisfaction toward taking these courses. All of the questionnaires and opinionnaire were statistically analyzed either by the university's Teaching & Development Section or the researchers themselves.

The results of the study indicated that students had positive attitudes toward the newly designed Freshman English courses. Students' satisfaction was remarkable. Even though it's really challenging for teachers to employ the Integrated Thematic Instruction Model in their language teaching classes; teachers are proactive in further developing the strategies among themselves and with others.

### **Introduction**

Education takes place inside students. This education is interdisciplinary and integrated whether or not that is the explicit goals of teachers or school system. Students relate each subject and reach experience to their previous learning, to their personal lives, and to the world around them. A teacher ( or a school system) can choose to directly aid each student in this process by providing a curriculum that is well – organized in content as well as in experience. Teachers can work together in various curricular planning teams. Students (especially college students) can help improve the design of the integrated curriculum (Wang,2001)

Nowadays, teachers realize that the traditional culture can not satisfy the psychological, moral, ethical, interpersonal, or spiritual needs of a student in such a global, post - industrial, and post - modern age. Only if we can determine what are the most appropriate to the needs of youngsters who will spend most of their lives in the twenty - first century, then we accomplish our highest and most honorable mission as contemporary teachers.

Therefore, the researchers worked as a team to design the same Freshman English course.

## **Literature Review**

### **Curriculum**

The definition of the term "curriculum" has been varied. It is apparent that ITIM related curriculum can be conceived in a broad way. Saylor and Alexander in 1974 defined curriculum in a light that could be interpreted as:

"The curriculum is the sum total of the school's efforts to influence learning, whether in the classroom, on the playground or out of school."

Ronald C. Doll (1978) defined the curriculum of a school as:

"Curriculum is the formal and informal content and process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills, and alter attitudes, appreciation, and value under the auspices of that school."

In search for clarifying the meaning of curriculum and its relationship with "instruction," the researcher view curriculum as " a plan or program for all the experiences which the learner encounters -in or outside of classroom - under the direction of the school." We may characterize "instruction" as methodology, the teaching act, implementation, and presentation.

### **Holistic Ethics and Education**

The holistic education approach has sought to balance intellectual (cognitive) development with emotional (affective) development, hence the "integration" of experience. George Brown, John Miller and other holistic educators have argued that a purely intellectual education involves only the external material world. Holistic educators proposed that education must give students the opportunity – and the skills – to integrate academic learning with personal meaning and purpose (Miller,1988). In the holistic approach, education is not an attempt to mold children's thought and behavior, but involves a deep concern for students as a person – for their mental health and self development, for their interpersonal skills and potential roles in society, and for their joy in learning (Miller,1990).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was multiple. Firstly, it was to use the Integrated Thematic Instruction Model(ITIM) as the approach for Freshman English. The use of ITIM (Huang, 1997) involves the integration among interdisciplinary subject themes and the collaboration from participating teachers as well as the feedback of participating students. Various themes/topic areas were selected first, then the core units were designed and put into practice in a weekly basis.

Secondly, the purpose of this study was to probe the participating student's self – evaluation and self-learning attitude in the class. The third purpose was to evaluate the content/topics covered in class, attitude of teaching, and instructional strategies used in this class.

### **Course Design**

To improve the quality of Freshman English course, the researchers decided to (1) gather more information that would help to identify students' expectations toward the class; (2) select content –based thematic integrated units that would meet students' multiple needs in today's society; (3) develop instructional strategies that would improve the quality of Freshman English course; (4) distribute a self-developed survey questionnaire in class, then collect and analyze data.

The design of the course was organized into a sequence of stages, which were as follows:

#### **1. Preparation Stage**

The principles for participating teachers of the ITIM course in this stage were: (1) Teachers were prepared, and able to master the content of textbook and other handouts. (2) Teachers were considerate and respect of each other. (3) Simple coordination for the

teachers. (4) Parallel planning. (5) Teachers agree that this is a three hour course.

The researcher was assigned to put her instructional emphasis on content – based reading and listening skill training, which included vocabulary building, topic sentence recognition, language focus, main idea finding, and verbal skill training.. The researcher reinforced learning by using a school-developed “Learning Booklet,” which help both teacher and students keep track on the progress of student’s performance in class. Each student was required to own one " Learning Booklet." All of the students were separated into small groups (4 – 5 persons per group) who worked on the in-class assignment/project at the same time; each group received points from the assignment or project. “Learning Booklets” kept records of student’s participating points. Participants were required to preview the reading context before they came to class; otherwise, they couldn’t complete those content-based reading or writing practices successfully. Group rewards motivate learners to perform better than individual performance and to increase the academic gains of their teammates (Chen,1999).

## 2. Implementation Stage

Integrated Thematic Instruction Model (ITIM) was implemented at this stage, the framework could be illustrated at Figure 1(Beane,1998).

In this study, the core thematic units were “Contemporary Ethics Units” and “Social Concern Units.” The core units were then integrated into “caring for the disadvantages unit” “interpersonal relation unit” "learning with immersion" as well as “gender difference/dating ethics unit” “environmental ethics unit.” Each unit had its own content-based learning activities followed with. For example, “story-telling” and “videotape viewing on feminism” were two activities pre-designed to help student grasp the key points of the specific gender difference unit.

In this ITIM teaching class, the researcher as a Taiwanese only spoke little Chinese in her class; students were strongly encouraged to express themselves mostly in English. In such a monolingual environment, students were all very stressful in the beginning of Fall semester in 2001, then they gradually overcame the difficulty.

## Research Methodology

To determine the expectations of students about the ITIM course and their feedback as the participants, the researchers administered an open-ended pre-course survey and a 5-item post-course survey questionnaire(see Appendix B). In the open-ended pre-course survey, the researchers asked the students during the first day of class to write answers to these questions: (1) What is your English learning expectation? (2) Which area would you like to improve most? (listening ability? verbal skill? grammar? writing? culture understanding? or reading ability?) Inthe post-course survey, the students were asked during the last day of class to write answers to : (1) What did you learn most in this class? (2) What skill did you improve most in this class? (3) Did you favor the materials selecting, teaching attitude, and activities practiced in this class?

As Nunan (1992) pointed out that using an open-ended format could generate valuable information by giving respondents an opportunity to express their ideas directly using their own words. The researchers applied the action research done by Jones (1999) to collect and analyze data. Both pre-course and post-course surveys probe for participating students’ preferences toward teaching attitude, skills to be learned, and their self-learning attitude. There were 3 open-ended questions distributed in the pre-course survey. As for post-course survey questionnaire, totally 3 open-ended questions were asked.

The methodology used to analyze data were varied. The procedures could be described as:

1. Category:(1) selecting materials and content/topics covered in the class

- (2) attitude of teaching from students' perspectives
- (3) self – evaluation of students in the class

Items 1- 3 in post-course survey questionnaire were categorized first, then analyzed in details. In both pre-course and post-course surveys, open-ended items were categorized first, then list the units of statements.

- 2. Rank: indicated participating students' preferences.
- 3. Percentage and frequencies : served as the foundation for further descriptive statistics.

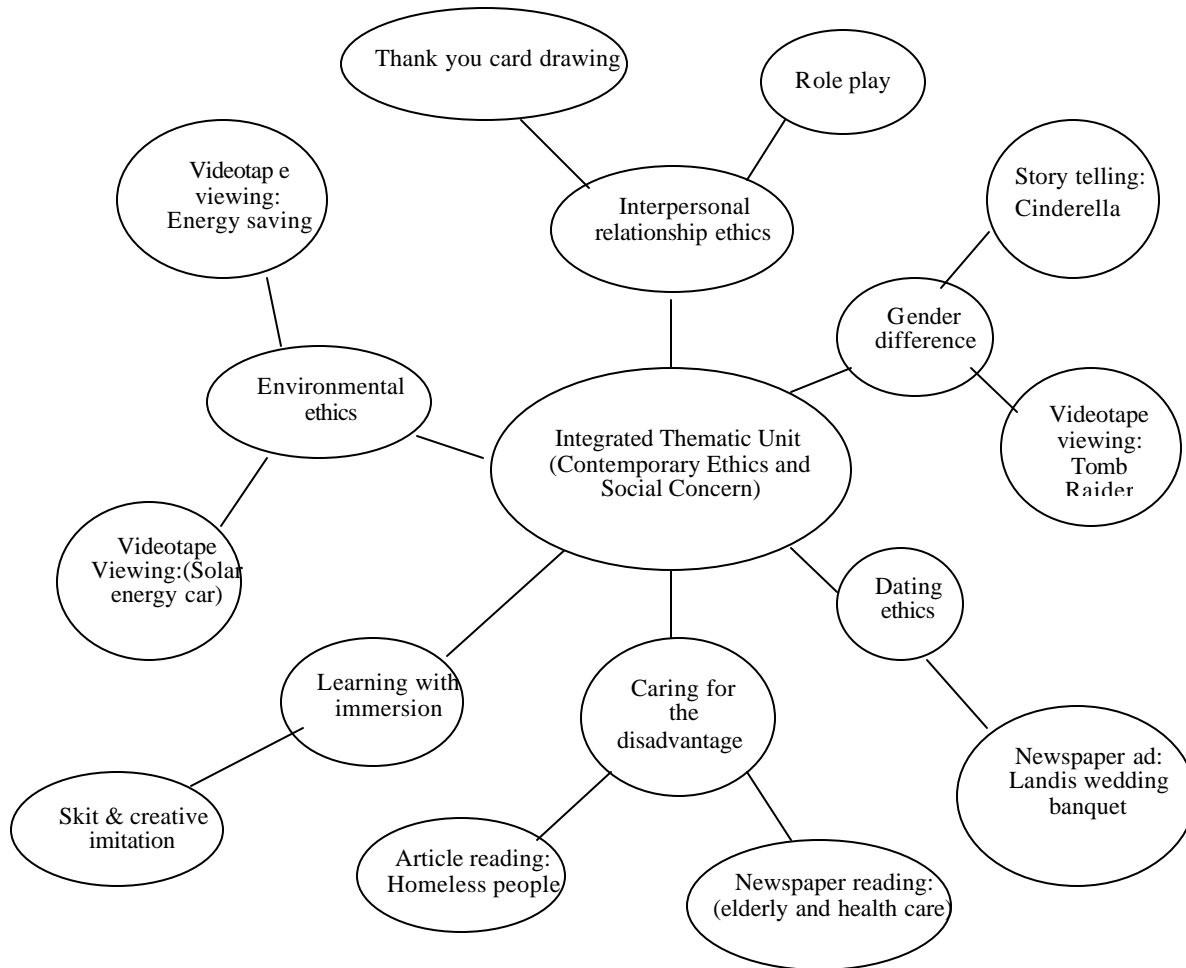


Figure 1. Modified Integrated The Integrated Thematic Instruction Model

### Data Interpretation

The overall results of the post-course survey questionnaire items 1 – 3 were categorized into : (1) Selecting Materials (i.e. textbook selection., content/topics covered in the class); (2) Attitude of Teaching from students' perspectives (i.e. good interaction in class, well-prepared for class); (3) Self -evaluation of students (i.e. English is important to me, my English has been improved.)

Items 1 - 3 in the post-course survey questionnaire were described in both qualitative and quantitative way. In comparison with the preference of participating students show from the pre-course survey, the results of the post-course survey questionnaire were also illustrated here. As a result, students expected to learn most from this class in the beginning of the first semester and their feedback at the end of the second semester were listed here.

Table 1. Pre-course: areas expected to improve most from ITIM teaching (Fall 2001)

Areas expected to learn	Frequency and percentage	Rank
Listening ability	48 (46%)	1
Conversation	33 (31%)	2
Grammar	3 (3%)	4
Writing	3 (3%)	4
Reading ability	17 (16%)	3

Table 2. Post-course: areas to be improved through ITIM teaching (Spring 2002)

Areas to be improved	Frequency and percentage	Rank
Listening ability	67 (73%)	1
Writing	6 (6%)	3
Culture understanding	4 (4%)	4
Verbal skill	8 (8%)	2
Reading ability	3 (3%)	5
Grammar	1 (1%)	6

Table 3. Student's self-evaluation on the importance of learning English (Fall 2001)

Importance of English learning	Frequency and percentage	Rank
Very important	27 (30%)	2
Important	51 (56%)	1
No comment	12 (13%)	3
Not important	1 (1%)	4

Table 4. Post-course: student's self-evaluation on how they like this course (Spring 2002)

Like this course	Frequency and percentage	Rank
I'll strongly recommend this course to others	8 (8%)	4
I like this course a lot	48 (53%)	1
No comment	21 (23%)	2
I don't like the course	11 (12%)	3
I don't like this course at all	3 (3%)	5

Table 5. Students' daily English self-study time (textbooks reading time excluded)

Time	Frequency and percentage	Rank
0 minute	14 (15%)	3
1-30 minutes	55 (56%)	1
31-59 minutes	2 (2%)	4
60 minutes or over	28 (28%)	2

In this study, the researcher applied the theory based on Lincoln and Guba (1985) to utilize the written responses of each open-ended item in both pre-course and post-course survey questionnaire as the qualitative data. It meant that the researchers counted the units which could be of phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or pairs of sentences focusing on a common topic. The researchers used index card, grouped the cards with the units into different categories according to their shared content. The researcher counted the frequencies of units for each category. To be more specific, the open-ended items (see Appendix A) used in the study were categorized in identical with items 1-5 of the post-course survey questionnaire.

### **Category 1. Textbook Selecting and content/topics covered in instruction** **Students' expectation about this class**

On the first day of class, the researcher administered an open-ended pre-course survey with questions like "Please describe your expectation for this class." The students wrote 338 words, of which the researcher identified 53 units, then grouped the units into 7 small categories describing how and which skill(s) students expected to improve in this class. Listed below were the descriptions.

- 19: Improve my English ability in general
- 11: Improve my listening and conversational skills
- 9: Teach us how to have conversation with foreigners
- 6: Improve my listening skill
- 3: Teach this course in English all the time
- 3: Able to read English magazine and improve reading skills
- 2: Express my ideas clearly

### **Students' feedback about textbook selection and content covered**

The students wrote 1503 words, of which the researcher identified 200 units, then grouped into 8 small categories describing students' feedbacks after they had one year of this course.

- 40: Textbook selected for this class met students' needs
- 40: Learning a lot from the class
- 37: Improve my listening ability a lot
- 34: The class improved my culture appreciation
- 17: The class is very challenging, I need to prepare for the class
- 13: Like to express gratitude toward the teachers for their good work
- 12: Need to have more homework assignments in the class
- 7: The content of textbook needed to be more challenging and more advanced

### **Category 2. Attitude of teaching**

#### **Students' feedback toward the teaching attitude**

The students wrote 813 words of which the researcher identified 90 units, then grouped into 4 small categories describing students' feedback toward teachers' teaching attitude.

- 37: Teachers were always well-prepared for class
- 33: Good interactions with the teacher who hardly speak any Chinese; she is nice
- 15: Teacher was very nice
- 14: Teacher was patient with us all the time

**Category 3. Self-evaluation of student’s self- learning attitude**  
**Students’ feedback about their own learning attitude**

The students wrote 1025 words of which the researcher identified 113 units, then grouped into 5 small categories describing student’s feedback about their own English learning attitude.

- 43: English is really important to me
- 24: Improve my English ability in general
- 22: I usually don’t spend time (over 20 minutes) on English in my daily life
- 21: I don’t work hard enough in this class
- 3: I am sorry for not working hard

**Category 4. Difficulty of taking ITIM course**

The students wrote 455 words of which the researcher identified 53 units, then grouped into 4 small categories describing students' feedback about this course.

- 22: More time is needed for us to learn better
- 20: The content is rich, but the vocabulary is difficult
- 6: Class time should be in the morning, better than in the afternoon
- 5: Too many quizzes and homeworks

Table 3 on the previous page demonstrated that students had to be more self-motivated in terms of learning English, their daily self-study time was definitely not enough. It seems to be a conflict between their recognition of the importance of English ( Table 5)and their willingness to spend more time studying English.

As for school-developed open-ended feedback form(Teaching Effectiveness Opinionnaire), data were collected and illustrated as follows:

Table 6. University - developed "Teaching-Effectiveness Opionnaire"

Category Scale	Textbook selection	Homework assignments	Learning from this course	Difficulty of the course	My own efforts/ self- study in this class
	Very difficult 2 (2%)	Quite a lot 0 (0%)	Quite a lot 2 (2%)	Very difficult 1 (1%)	Quite a lot 6 (6%)
	Difficult 5 (5%)	A lot 4 (4%)	A lot 22 (25%)	Difficult 19 (21%)	A lot 20 (22%)
	Average 72 (80%)	Average 66 (74%)	Average 53 (60%)	Average 52 (59%)	Average 46 (51%)
	Easy 9 (10%)	Few 15 (17%)	A little 9 (10%)	Easy 15 (17%)	A little 15 (17%)
	Very Easy 1 (1%)	Very few 4 (4%)	Little 2 (2%)	Very easy 2 (2%)	Little 2 (2%)
Total sample	89	89	89	89	89

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

The researcher would like to quote from McNiff (1988) who said, ” For if we as teachers are truly to fulfill our obligations as educators, then we must accept the responsibility of first educating ourselves.” It’s true that teachers are life-long learners, we learn from our daily teaching life.

In this study, ITIM teaching did fulfill students’ learning needs demonstrated in the pre-course survey, especially on the improvement of listening skill. The researchers assumed

that it was because of the specially designed English speaking environment, students really had to understand the lessons taught by the teacher, thus they could survive the class. Furthermore, the various contents covered from ITIM successfully delivered the contemporary as well as global concerns. Time shortage was the biggest problem which needed to be solved immediately; more teaching time would be helpful. Overall speaking, ITIM teaching was highly praised from students' feedback; it really deserves re-examination and further study.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Pre-course survey**

1. Please describe your expectation toward this class.  
(e.g. which area would you like to improve most?)
2. Please describe how important it is for you to learn English.
3. Please describe your English learning experiences in the past.

### **Post-course Survey Questionnaire**

1. Please describe which area(s) you did improve most in this ITIM class.
2. Please specify your daily English learning time(textbook reading time excluded).
3. Please provide your suggestions to your teacher. Any difficulty? Strength?

## **Appendix B**

### **School-developed Feedback Form(Teaching Effectiveness Opinionnaire)**

1. Your overall comments about this ITIM teaching class (i.e. difficulty of class, homework assignment, textbook selection, which area you did improve yourself, teachers' preparation for class).