EMPHASIS ON CULTURE OR ISSUES OF DIVERSITY THROUGH READING

AND WRITING ACTIVITIES

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the implementation of a thematic unit was designed to be taught in the Arabic classroom to Grade 8-10 as part of the presenter’s student teaching experience. The unit theme was The Arab Spring. The focus class was tenth grade students in a private school in Fridley, MN. Students came from diverse cultural backgrounds and Arabic is considered their third language. For 4 weeks, the students were engaged in different learning activities to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, and listening through four different Arab Spring themed lessons. The integrated performance assessments were involved to provide an evidence of what students can do in the end of the unit.

**INTRODUCTION**

Thematic unit is the aim of Content-based Instruction. “In the content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language.” (Snow, 2011, p.2)

Thus, backward design is an effective approach to planning that helps teachers meets their teaching goals. It consists of three steps: identify desired results, determine accepted evidence for learning, and plan learning activities and instruction that help students reach the goals. Therefore, teachers need to think about what the students will be able to perform by the end of the unit and the goals they will achieve through texts, learning activities, technology tools, differentiate instruction, and assessments. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005) “Too many teachers focus on the teaching and not the learning. They spend most of their time thinking, first, about what they will do, what materials they will use, and what they will ask students to do rather than first considering what the learner will need in order to accomplish the learning goals. ” (p.15)

There are several benefits for student learning through the use of thematic units. According to Barto (2013), “there are many reasons to organize curriculum around themes based on questions such as:

* Students see the big picture so that they can make sense of English language instruction.
* Content areas (math, science, social studies, and literature), are interrelated.
* Vocabulary is repeated naturally as it appears in different content area studies.
* Through themes based on big questions, teachers can connect curriculum to students’ lives. This makes the curriculum more interesting.
* Because the curriculum makes sense, English language learners are more fully engaged and experience greater success.
* Since themes deal with universal human topics, all students can be involved, and lessons and activities can be adjusted to different levels of English language proficiency” (p. 1).

Therefore, I use a backward design to prepare my thematic unit under a big umbrella of five C’s. Standards for foreign language learning focus on five goal areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. The five C’s work together to help the language learner be able to use three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational to foster language skills. I enjoyed teaching the Arabic language through thematic unit instead of using a textbook. In this educational setting, the textbook used for teaching language learning was designed for native speakers in Arab countries. It focuses on reading comprehension and grammar.INTRODUCTION

**UNIT THEME: ARAB SPRING**

The Arab revolution or the Arab Spring is the movement of a massive peasful protest launched in several Arab countries during 2010 influenced by the revolution of Tunisia because of the economic problems, poor living conditions, repression, corruption of the regimes, and lack of integrity of the elections in most Arab countries. Even though there were different local causes for the Arab Spring the protests had the same motivations. The effect of Arab Spring is still affecting some Arab countries today.

This unit highlights the revolution event within the Arab culture through reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. Students will build their knowledge about the events of the Arab revolutions, types of governments, and how people react toward its using rap music, social media, movies, and political cartoons.

The unit theme contains four lessons: The Arab Spring in Tunisia, Social media and Tunisian Revolution, Rap Music, and Political Cartoons Supporting the Arab Spring. The essential questions that guide this unit are: What is the Arab Spring? What were the causes of the Arab spring? What role has rap music played in the Arab Spring? How do political cartoons support the Arab Spring? And how have social media affected Tunisian revolution?

**Lesson 1: The Arab Spring in Tunisia**

In this lesson students read an article from Aljazeera’s website about how the Arab Spring started in Tunisia. This article introduced students to the causes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and how an individual can make a difference.

**Lesson 2: Social media and Tunisian Revolution**

In this lesson students watched video clips from YouTube about the use of social media and technology in the Tunisian revolution.

These video clips attempt to answer several questions, such as: What is the role of social media and bloggers in moving people to streets until the regime stepped down in Tunisia?

Students watched the video to activate their existing knowledge about Tunisian revolution after reading about the topic from the previous lesson. I used this authentic material to provide an opportunity for students to watch an authentic event to prepare them to write about it.

**Lesson 3: Rap music supports the Arab spring**

In this lesson, students were exposed to videos discussing the rap music. The first video’s content is a news report from LBCI News about a rap concert in Beirut (Lebanon). The second video’s content was Tunisian rap music. These videos exposed students to both Tunisian and Lebanese dialects.

These videos helped students to access their existing knowledge and expectations to help them understand the concept and identify the role of Rap music in spreading the messages of youth suffering with the Arab regimes.

**Lesson 4: Political Cartoons Support the Arab Spring**

In this lesson students exposed to another tool used to support the Arab Spring: political cartoons and caricature drawing. This is the first time that Arabs feel free to create cartoons and caricatures about the regimes and dictators without losing their freedom. The revolutions were a dream for almost all of the Arab people.

All cartoon designers and caricature artists act quickly through their graphics to help people express their feeling towards revolutions without losing their sense of humor. In each demonstration, people create several caricatures and drawings to express their feeling towards the governmental corruption and dictatorship.

The use of cartoon and caricature are good opportunities for students to use their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in the target language and to gain more knowledge about the Arab people and their sense of humor even in difficult situations.

**INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT**

The IPA was implemented during the design phase of the thematic unit for this grade level as evidence of what students can do in the end of the unit. I chose The IPA because it provides tasks that are authentic and does the following:

* “Ask students to do/apply the subject matter rather than merely recite information.
* Replicates the context in which adults are tested in the workplace, civic life, and personal life.
* Assess student’s ability to use a repertoire of knowledge and skills.
* Assess learner’s knowledge and abilities in real –world situations.”( IIPA, p.4)

Students were given five days to finish the three modes of communication including preparation, giving feedback to each other on their writing, proofreading of the essays and questions for interpersonal task. All students received feedback from the teacher and encouraged to ask questions for clarification to enhance their writing skills and build their backgrounds knowledge. Students worked in pairs and small groups to get ready for the performance tasks. The performance tasks are:

Interpretive Mode

* Students read a text selected from an article retrieved from an online newspaper, then used the Comprehension Guide from IIPA to complete the task.

Interpersonal Mode

* Students wrote eight to ten questions from their choice about the unit and choose partners to interact with them using their own questions. The interpersonal task was recorded.

Presentational Mode

* Students wrote letters to the Tunisian ambassador in Washington to present summaries about what they have learned about Tunisian revolution and how rap music, political cartoons, and social media supported the revolution.

**WHAT STUDENTS ALREADY KNOW AND CAN DO**

Students were exposed to the “Arab Spring” for the first time in this educational setting. They were so excited to learn some topics from around the world in order to be knowledgeable. They have some ideas of the Arab Spring from news and discussions with their parents, but they do not know how the Arab Spring started and spread across Arab countries. From graphic organizers, we concluded that students have little knowledge about the causes of Tunisian revolution and what helped spread the words of it around the world. Furthermore, they lack the vocabulary needed to complete the required activities and their proficiency levels are different. Thus, I implemented many learning activities that enhance and increase their language skills in writing, speaking, listening, and reading in the Arabic language class.

To meet all students with different styles of learning, I provided hands-on activities, posters, pictures, songs, video clips, drawing, graphic organizers, creative activity by students, vocabulary games, think-aloud, and learning stations. Learning about what students can do and cannot do was very helpful for me to change my lesson plan whenever I felt the students did not understand. Thus, my job is to bridge the gaps and help them to achieve the next level.

Lastly, after exposing students to several speaking tasks using learning activities, authentic materials, and building their vocabularies, the results of the formal and summative assessments showed significant progress in their understandings of the concept and communicative proficiency. According to the ACTFL rating scale, students were understood by native speakers and could handle sample conversations in real world situations. They were able to discuss the concept outside the classroom and provide their perspectives.

The students in this educational setting were learning the Arabic language in a traditional way; thus, the thematic unit instruction and integration of technology tools, grouping, learning activities, visual supports, and giving feedback to each other helped students to build their background knowledge about the Arab Spring and improve their language skills in a short period of time.

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