

IMPLICATIONS OF USING THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION

**POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF USING THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION IN AN EFL  
SETTING SUCH AS COLOMBIA**

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SAN JUAN DE PASTO**

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**NOTA DE ACEPTACIÓN**

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**SAN JUAN DE PASTO, 20 FEBRERO, 2015**

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Quiero dedicar éste trabajo de grado a mis padres, padrinos, mi segunda familia en Boston, y a mis amigas (os) ya que son el mejor regalo q Dios y la vida me han dado.

**RESUMEN**

Theme-Based Instruction es un modelo de enseñanza de Content-Based Instruction (CBI) basado en tópicos que integra aspectos de otras áreas del conocimiento como historia, matemáticas, arte, entre otras. Al mismo tiempo, este método incorpora habilidades afectivas comunicativas y de lenguaje. Este modelo de enseñanza comparte principios sobre la adquisición de un segundo idioma (SLA), principios comunicativos, y psicología cognitiva. Adicionalmente, estudiantes y maestros pueden interactuar entre sí y con el lenguaje real a través de dos importantes técnicas de enseñanza usadas por TBI: Brainstorming and webbing. De acuerdo a los estudios prácticos implementados en algunas partes de Asia y Colombia, TBI proporciona múltiples beneficios en las clases de inglés como reducir de alguna manera estrategias de enseñanza tradicionales usadas en algunos colegios, y aumentar lenguaje real, motivación intrínseca, creatividad en maestros, así como también aumento de habilidades comunicativas y socio-afectivas en los estudiantes. Sin embargo, existen algunas condiciones como políticas educativas compuestas por El Ministerio Nacional de Educación y cuestiones administrativas que podrían reducir el interés de implementar enfoques comunicativos como TBI en salones de clase Colombianos. Debido a esto, se recomienda analizar las necesidades, realidades y el contexto de los estudiantes. Así como también, los objetivos del currículo escolar. Igualmente es importante implementar en las clases de inglés materiales comunicativos y auténticos evitando el uso de exámenes explícitos de lápiz y papel para evaluar el progreso del alumnado y prestando más atención a los resultados intrínsecos de los estudiantes.

**SUMMARY**

Theme-Based Instruction is a teaching model of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) based on topics that integrates aspects of other curriculum areas such as history, mathematics, arts, among others. As well as, it incorporates language skills, affective, and communicative abilities. This teaching method shares principles of Second Language Acquisition Research (SLA), communicative approaches, and cognitive psychology. Additionally, students and teachers can interact each other and with the real language through two important teaching techniques of TBI: Brainstorming and Webbing. According to practical cases with TBI implemented in some parts of Asia and Colombia TBI provides multiple benefits in language classrooms such as reducing in some way traditional teaching strategies used in some schools, and increasing real language, intrinsic motivation, creativity language instruction, socio-affective abilities, and communication in students. Therefore, there are some conditions such as policies composed by The National Ministry of Education, and administrative issues that could reduce the interest in implementing communicative approaches like TBI in Colombian classrooms. Due to this, it is recommended to analyze students' needs, realities, context, and objectives of school curriculum. Similarly, it is important to implement in language classrooms communicative and authentic materials avoiding the use of explicit pencil-test to evaluate learners' progression and stressing more attention to students' intrinsic outcomes.

**ABSTRACT**

This research paper involves discovering the possible benefits and drawbacks of implementing Theme-based Instruction (TBI) in an EFL setting like Colombia. The goal is to enhance communicative and meaningful teaching methods in Colombian classrooms. This has been done by examining theoretical and practical information about TBI, as well as the role of English in Colombia. Upon examination of these issues, it becomes clear that the implementation of TBI in this country is unlikely due to external circumstances, language standards and policies that influence English teaching in this country. Based on this final outcome, this research highlights the importance of implementing communicative approaches like TBI through some final recommendations.

*Key words:* Theme-based Instruction (TBI), English in Colombia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning a second language should not be seen as a simple process of memorizing a specific set of grammar rules; learning a language involves more than that. The process of teaching and learning English should be seen as a holistic process that integrates communicative and socio-affective skills development. According to The Whole Language Movement, language should be used for meaningful purposes and for authentic functions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 108-109).

This principle is well defended and embedded in Theme-Based Instruction (TBI) which provides, according to Cameron (2001), a series of principles found in communicative approaches such as motivation, natural language use, authentic materials, and communicative opportunities. Another contribution that also supports in this sense theme-based instruction is made by Richards and Rodgers (2001) who state that teaching via topics provides a good basis to develop an integrated skills approach (p. 208).

To emphasize this rational motivation, this research paper aims to analyze the possible implications of using Theme-based Instruction as a model of Content-based Instruction (CBI) in Colombia as an EFL setting. Therefore, the main purpose of this research paper is to investigate the possible potentialities and/or obstacles of implementing TBI in this country. In order to accomplish this purpose, this work will focus on specific objectives that will analyze the theoretical and experimental part of TBI, as well as English in Colombia. Additionally, this analysis will be based on the critical review of authors in the area and on the implementation of TBI in different settings.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research paper aims to analyze Theme-based Instruction in terms of origins, functions, and characteristics; to analyze the Colombian context in terms of policy making and conditions that influence EFL in this country; and to draw a comparison between national and international practical cases with TBI with the objective of finding possible benefits and/or obstacles to implement TBI in Colombia. Taking into account the results of this research, a pedagogical proposal to implement TBI in public schools in this country will be presented.

The first specific objective of this paper focuses on briefly analyzing the origin, function and characteristics of TBI with the purpose of understanding the benefits of implementing TBI as a possible teaching alternative in a context like the Colombia one.

### **2.1.1. The Origins of Theme-based Instruction**

Theme-Based Instruction, or Topic-Based Instruction (TBI), is a teaching method based on topics. TBI has its origins in Content-based Instruction (CBI). According to Snow (cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001) the initiatives that supported CBI origins, and therefore TBI, are focused on Second Language Acquisition research, Communicative Approaches and Cognitive Psychology (p. 304). This explains why TBI works under communicative principles like motivation, natural language use, learners' needs, authentic materials and communication. Theme-based Instruction, along with sheltered and adjunct models, are versions of CBI, which were created to alleviate some limitations found in CBI (Richards, Rodgers & Snow cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001). The limitation of CBI is reflected on its complex functioning and performance. In terms of Brown, Richards and Rodgers (2001), CBI requires teachers to become experts on both language teaching and similarly on other areas of the curriculum such as math, geography or culture.

According to Snow (cited in Celce Murcia, 2001), in order to choose any model of CBI like Theme-Based Instruction, Sheltered or Adjunct model, it is necessary to analyze factors like type of setting, audience and objectives. In the case of TBI, this is a flexible teaching model that can be used in both EFL and ESL settings, in schools or universities, therefore for any purpose (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 216-218).

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), TBI shares some principles of CBI such as when the information of a second language is perceived as interesting, meaningful, and seeks a desired goal people learn more successfully; when language instruction focuses on students' needs learning is better (p. 209-211). This does not mean that TBI and CBI are the same. In words of Richards and Rodgers (2001) CBI is considered as an approach, "CBI is not a teaching method, it is an approach since there are no specific techniques or activities that are associated with it" (p. 219). On the other hand, TBI could be closely considered as a method since in words of Cameron (2001) it describes the processes of planning, language strategies and activities. CBI or "Content-centered" language teaching involves content or subject matter in the learning process. On the contrary, TBI organizes lessons around topics which connect many different activities across other areas of the curriculum.

In short, CBI is an approach whereas TBI is a method. CBI has some limitations that can be overcome by its model of theme-based instruction that has its origins on second language research, communicative and cognitive approaches. Those characteristics make TBI an integrated skills approach.

### **2.1.2. Theme-based Instruction as an Integrated Method**

Topic-Based Instruction (TBI) defends very well the principle of “integration”. In terms of Richards and Rodgers (2001), themes or topics promote continuity and coherence across skill areas and focus on using the language in connected discourse rather than isolated pieces of language. In this sense, “theme-based courses bring together knowledge, language, and thinking skills” (p. 208).

For instance, in this model of CBI, language teachers will be able to choose first a main topic like “traditional Colombian dishes”. Later they will divide that topic into various sub-topics such as “types of dishes of each region”, “their origins”, their preparation”, “their importance in Colombia”. This information will give the content to create many different learning activities, activities that aim to integrate aspects of other subject areas such as mathematics, geography, music, and arts, among others (Cameron, 2001).

In terms of Mumford (1995), there are four steps to plan a good and organized theme course. They include choosing a theme, planning ahead, putting the plan into action, and evaluating. In these steps, learners` interests are considered. In the thematic planning, students and teachers have the opportunity to work together by choosing a determined topic, setting objectives, planning activities, involving other areas of the curriculum, making possible changes and evaluating intellectual, human and skills progress that will finally increase students` curiosity, interest, and motivation for the new language that they are dealing with. Therefore, TBI could be interpreted as an interconnected “chain” of meaningful and coherent language elements and strategies.

On the other hand, topics give the possibility to create contextualized and integrated language atmospheres since they are the basis to develop an organized micro-to-macro process which goes beyond the simplest functions to the most complex ones. In a study done by Brinton (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) at the Free University of Berlin in a course called the theme-based Intensive Language Course (ILC), he describes a series of themes that are organized under a micro-to-macro process in terms of language structures and learners' needs. Brinton (1989) argues that "the first six sub-topics such as "drugs", "religious persuasion", "advertising", "Britain and the race question", "native Americans", and "modern architecture" reflected students' interests, while the later sub-topics such as "microchip technology", "ecology", "alternative energy", "nuclear energy", "Dracula in myth, novel, and films", and "professional ethnics" dealt with more technical and challenging processes that assume mastery of certain skills" (p. 212 ). In words of Brinton (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) "all modules (sub-topics) move from an initial exercise intended to stimulate student's interest in the theme through a variety of exercises aimed at developing comprehension and students' ability to manipulate the language and its use in communicative interaction" (p. 212).

The benefits of teaching English through topics is also well supported by Brown (2001) who argues that "Challenging topics can engage the curiosity and increase motivation of students as they grapple with an array of real-life issues ranging from simple to complex and also provide their linguistic skills"(p. 237). Theme-based teaching has the ability to provide real and motivating language with meaningful purposes (Cameron, 2001, p. 182). In this sense, topics provide content to develop a number of activities based on aspects of subject matter developing in this way a micro-to-macro process.

Theme-based teaching uses two basic planning techniques: “Brainstorming”, a mental process that starts with one idea and then sparks off others through random and spontaneous links; and “webbing”, a way of writing down ideas that connect with each other. Both teaching strategies permit to connect ideas of a theme in a non-linear form. Through brainstorming and webbing, it is possible to add elements or aspects of curriculum areas, guiding questions that teachers and students want to know about the theme, and discourse types that can be carried out by both students and teachers (Cameron, 2001).

In short, teaching through topics is an integrated and holistic model of CBI which has its origins in communicative approaches, second language acquisition research, and cognitive psychology theories. The principles taken from those approaches like learner-centered instruction, authentic language, real input, creative outcomes, self-directed learning, automaticity, meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, communicative competence, among others, made TBI a potential teaching alternative to be implemented in a context like Colombia.

Taking into account the origin, function, and properties of TBI described in this paper, it is easier to continue with the next specific objective of this research which refers to analyzing the way how teaching and learning English is seen in Colombia, the national policies and the type of conditions that influence English learning.

### **2.2.1. English Teaching and Language policies in Colombia**

According to the National Ministry of Education (MEN, 2006) in its document “Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés” in Colombia, English is located in a foreign language context because of the lack of real opportunities to practice and interact with the new language inside and outside the classroom. In words of Brown (2001),

“Foreign language contexts are those in which students do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classroom, they may be obtainable through language clubs, special media opportunities, books or an occasional tourist” (p. 116). Therefore, to compensate for that lack of real opportunities to interact with the language found in foreign settings like Colombia, Brown (2001) suggests some guidelines to provide students with ready communicative situations outside the classroom. These include involving students with real language input and social interaction in the English class; addressing homework outside the classroom, providing activities that stimulate students` motivation, providing real language simulations related to learners` reality, trying to ignore explicit paper-pencil tests and stressing more attention to creative and intrinsic outcomes, providing extra activities such as watching an English-speaking movie, listening to an English-speaking TV or radio program, having conversations among students, reading outside, writing a journal or diary in English, motivating students to use and listen to the foreign language outside the classroom, and creating a club or group to improve English language through practice.

Colombian language policy makers that regulate and control learning and teaching English in an EFL setting are composed by the Central Government that, according to Usma (2009), issued in 1994, the “General Education Law 115” (Ley General de Educación 115). This educational law regulates and organizes the standards and language guidelines for instruction in the country. It reinforces the necessity to learn other languages and included English language as a mandatory area of school curriculum starting in elementary school.

The General Education Law 115 was designed by “The National Ministry of Education (MEN), which later gave origin to “The National Bilingualism Program” and “the Basic Standards for foreign languages” based on the development of 8 policy tasks:

The introduction of Bilingualism; establishment of English-Spanish languages; designation of the British Council organization; adoption of the “Common European Framework of References for Languages” (CEFR); definition of standards; introduction of international standards; institutionalization of language approaches and methods; deregulation that allows private organizations to compete with public institutions (MEN cited in Usma, 2009, p. 23).

In words of De Mejia (2011), the Bilingualism National Program was created in 2004, and later in 2006, “The Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Language: English” (Estándares Básicos para Competencia en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés) were established. In words of Usma (2009), the Bilingualism National Program and the Standards for Foreign Languages have been influenced by international actors such as the British Council, The World Bank and aspects of Globalization.

In Colombia, English teaching is not only influenced by educational policies, standards for foreign languages, and the Bilingualism National Program, but also by certain conditions and challenges that teachers and students have to face.

### **2.2.2. Other conditions influencing English teaching in Colombia**

The limited number of language instruction hours cannot compensate for the lack of opportunities to interact with the foreign language in an EFL setting in order to achieve the objectives set in the Bilingualism National Plan. According to the MEN (2006), some low primary schools have assigned one hour of English instruction per week, whereas, in elementary schools the time of language instruction is assigned around two to four hours (p. 31). The lack of language proficiency level and skills management in some English teachers, the management of

courses of approximately 30 to 40 students, the lack of resources, the preference for traditional teaching strategies by teachers and students, as well as English teaching carried out by other professionals, are other issues that influence English teaching in this country.

In summary, English is a popular and necessary language used in many countries for business and communication purposes. In Colombia, English is seen as a foreign language for academic, communicative, political and economic purposes. The National Ministry of Education (MEN) along with “The Bilingualism National Program and The Basic Standards of competence for foreign languages: English” based on the CEFR, are the main educational policies and together with some administrative conditions influence English teaching in this country. With the standards for foreign languages and the Bilingualism National Program, the Colombian government intends to develop citizens able to communicate in English following a number of levels that will serve as points of reference to know what the population knows about the foreign language and what things they can do with that language (MEN, 2006, p. 11).

With this information in mind, it is possible then to continue with the third part of this paper which focuses on analyzing and comparing the empirical studies done in international contexts with the ones carried out in Colombia.

### **2.3.1. International and National Practical Cases with TBI**

The international studies about TBI were implemented in Iceland, Hong-Kong, Turkey, and Southeast Asia, whereas, the national one was carried out in Medellin. The international studies together with the national one shared a similar purpose. They were focused on investigating the effects of implementing TBI in schools.

Theme-Based Instruction is an English teaching methodology that can be used with both children of lower primary level and learners of high school. In some studies done by Cadavid, Bourke, and Chi Cheung (2009), TBI was implemented with children of kindergarten to fifth grade, whereas, in studies carried out by Kiziltan, Ersanli and Hólmfríður (2011), TBI was implemented with students of sixth to tenth grade. The results were similar and positive in both cases. The objectives of each study such as activating the ability of “learning by doing”, improving the four language skills, increasing communicative abilities and enhancing learner-centered instruction on teaching assistants, rejecting traditional teaching methods like GTM, developing a wide range of knowledge in language, human, social, and cognitive skills, as well as, increasing in all students critical thinking, creativity, motivation and responsibility were achieved.

The final results of the empirical study carried out by Hólmfríður (2011) showed that Theme-Based Instruction became a good alternative to reject traditional teaching strategies like GTM since TBI enhances the practice of written and oral skills, as well as communicative abilities and learner-centered instruction. Hólmfríður (2011) considered the opinion, needs, and interests of learners of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade since they had the opportunity to choose the topic of their interest through interviews. In this way, 8<sup>th</sup> graders chose “the old American west”, 9<sup>th</sup> graders studied ghost and supernatural”, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders decided to study “the perfect world”. The mentioned topics were divided in sub-themes that made students work in couples or teams, as well as those sub-themes permitted students to work on the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing making students improve in this way their abilities of communication and language skills in English.

According to results obtained in Chi Cheung's (2009) project called "Revive my Dreams" carried out at seven educational centers located in seven districts of Hong Kong, teaching and learning English through TBI became a more integrated, contextualized, fun, and meaningful process since the themes chosen by the twelve teaching assistants such as "about me", "food", "fun places in Hong Kong", "transportation", and "the Olympics" were organized according to learners' reality, age, proficiency level, context, and needs. The mentioned topics were also connected with language skills and socio-affective abilities.

In a study carried out by Cadavid (2003) at the University of Antioquia in a course called "Thematic Spiral Curriculum", she describes a series of themes that were organized under a micro-to-macro process. The topics selected by the six teaching assistants such as "all about me", "my school and neighborhood", "exploring my body", "my country", and "my world" reflected very simple topics to more complex ones, as well as kids' interests and real-lives. Those topics that were addressed to children from kindergarten to fifth grade pushed children to explore facts of their own environment with the objective of analyzing, comparing and understanding life-styles and cultures of foreign contexts. The results of Cadavid's (2003) project also showed that with the implementation of TBI children enhanced not only their knowledge of English, but also they reinforced concepts of other school subjects like geography, math, and biology, among others. Cadavid (2003) also argues that TBI could be a good alternative to teach English in a meaningful and interesting way in Colombia, but the lack of resources like video and audio tools, coupled with not clear policies, could hinder the implementation of TBI.

In terms of Cadavid, Kiziltan, Ersanli, and Hólmsfrídur (2011), Theme-Based Instruction is not only a good teaching alternative for students, but also for teachers since in these studies teachers and teaching assistants increased their creativity for language instruction making

language material more interesting and fun for their students. Through real-life topics teachers connected students with other school areas creating in this way interesting language activities for their students.

The results obtained by Kiziltan and Ersanli (2007) showed that Theme-Based Instruction also provides the necessary conditions for students to learn from their classmates since TBI permits to work in groups or pairs enhancing in this way social, communicative and cooperative abilities.

In terms of Kiziltan and Ersanli (2007), the implementation of TBI in High schools could be confusing for students since most of them learn English by means of traditional strategies, therefore, this teaching methodology would be something new for them.

Finally, according to the results obtained by Bourke (2006) in his TBI study implemented in South Asia, it was showed that it was a challenge to integrate language input and skills in a suitable way since children of kindergarten to fifth grade are not linguistically ready for long story writing or big-book readings.

As we can see, the results of these five empirical studies were positive, showing in this way that TBI is a holistic and integrated teaching option for the Colombian public educational system. All of them investigated the impact and effectiveness of TBI to foster communicative competence on students of elementary school level. The final results led to the conclusion that the implementation of TBI improved the interest of students and children on English and their intrinsic motivation increased greatly. The learning process became more fun and creative. Students' critical thinking and responsibility for their own learning process increased as well as the use of language skills. Teaching assistants became more creative in language instruction and

learner's needs were taken into account. Moreover, the development of opportunities for communication, cooperative, human and social skills were improved, and learners had more opportunities to interact and explore other curriculum areas through English. Learners successfully developed more language strategies to understand the new language.

So far, TBI properties, the Colombian context in terms of English role, policy making, and conditions that influence the foreign language teaching, as well as, Theme-based implementation in some different settings have been analyzed. Based on this information the possible benefits and obstacles of implementing Theme-based Instruction as a model of CBI in Colombia as an EFL setting will be analyzed.

### **3.1. Potentialities of implementing TBI in Colombia**

In a country like Colombia, where English is seen as a foreign language that has to be taught since pre-school, the implementation of a model of CBI like Topic-Based Instruction could be a possible teaching alternative to increase communicative abilities and meaningful learning in students.

The implementation of Theme-based Instruction in Colombia would reduce in some way the use of traditional strategies to teach English since the combination of curriculum areas aspects and language content would increase language skills and communicative abilities on students making learning a more authentic and meaningful process.

A very important benefit of implementing TBI in Colombian schools may be the increase of intrinsic motivation since this teaching model allows to work with relevant topics that adjust to students' realities and needs enhancing their interest in the language. According to the final

results of the experimental projects previously mentioned in this research paper, the interest in English and intrinsic motivation increased after the use of TBI activities.

Finding a topic is another advantage of implementing TBI in Colombia since it is a very easy task. According to Cameron (2001), a theme can come from the children's interests, from topics being studied in other classes, from a story, from media, and even from a local or international festival, event, or a common habit (p. 185).

Through a "Choice points" process, brainstorming and webbing learning strategies, learners can be more responsible for their own learning process, and for making decisions, they can also assess their knowledge in the language, their interest around a topic, and their self-directed ability (Cameron, 2001, p. 185-188).

In order to compensate for the lack of real opportunities to interact with English in an EFL setting, as well as, the insufficient instructional hours allocated to language teaching in Colombian classrooms, Topic-based courses would provide a great number of creative outcomes and authentic language input reflected on students' production and teachers' instruction. Creative outcomes include projects, school journals, crafts, presentations, conversations, and poems, among others, that would discuss relevant topics such as environment, pollution, family, different cultures around the world, Colombian celebrations, and so on. These language products obtained from learners' creativity would be also saved in portfolios, magazines, school newspapers and other kinds of language containers (Cameron, 2001, p. 194). On the other hand, language input reflected on the use of discourse types along with the combination of school areas would have cookery forms like restaurant menus or recipes; science forms like important inventions; linguistic forms like novels or myths, and other types of real language forms (Cameron, 2001, p.

193). The mentioned material will not only provide a range of meaningful content but also it will enhance motivation, fun and interest in learning English.

The implementation of TBI in this country may increase interaction, communication, cooperative, and socio-affective abilities among students dividing activities into groups of work compensating in this way for the high number of students in Colombian classrooms and relieving classroom management problems, high noise levels and individual progress evaluation.

Another benefit of implementing Theme-based instruction in Colombia is reflected on the improvement of the four language skills. According to the results of the practical cases mentioned in this research paper, the students enhanced their literacy and oral language skills after Theme-based Instruction was implemented.

Theme-based implementation in this country might also contribute to English teachers' improvement in instruction since through authentic content they could increase their creativity. Moreover, with extra activities obtained from Theme-based instruction teachers could use that language material as supplement of the English course book making learning a more authentic and meaningful process (Cameron, 2001, p. 184).

Another positive outcome of implementing TBI in Colombia is reflected on Cadavid's (2001) practical project, in which students had the opportunity to explore very simple topics with more complex ones learning English in a contextualized and real form.

### **3.2. Foreseen pitfalls of implementing TBI in Colombia**

According to Cameron (2001), preparing language lessons in advance in order to organize sub-themes, tasks, and materials; identifying language objectives for each activity, as well as

integrating aspects of school areas in a suitable way, are complex and demanding processes that could reduce the interest of current teachers to implement TBI in their English lessons. It seems that for language teachers in Colombia the use of traditional teaching methods that are not demanding like GTM are favored, probably because as Brown (2001) states the popularity of GTM is due to the use of few specialized skills on the part of teachers, traditional language strategies are not demanding, and translation and grammar tests are easy to carry out.

Another obstacle to the implementation of TBI in Colombia is the wide repertoire of language activities and resources that a language teacher has to know, as well as a skilled management of group work since TBI is based on communicative and cooperative approaches. Moreover, teachers also need to know about aspects of cognitive, language and motor skills development in order to plan, ensure and evaluate progression in students. In the implementation of TBI, educators also need to be organized to create a good language atmosphere (Cameron, 2001). These demands could reduce the interest to use theme-based instruction activities.

At the beginning, the implementation of a new teaching method based on communicative principles like Theme-Based Instruction may be confusing to students since they are used to memorizing sets of grammar rules or to translate English into Spanish or vice-versa. According to the limitations found in a study carried out by Hólmsfríður (2011) in Iceland, it showed that at the beginning, the implementation of TBI was confusing to students of eighth, ninth and tenth grade since they were used to traditional teaching strategies.

Another issue that might interfere with theme-based implementation in Colombia is the influence of educational policies which require a certain amount of material covered by the end of the school year. According to Cameron (2001) maintaining progression, motivation, control,

and more politically motivated concerns about standards are obstacles that could prevent the implementation of theme-based instruction in many schools (p. 180).

Current economic and political conditions in Colombia may also become an obstacle to implement TBI in schools. Such as the lack of resources, the insufficient instructional hours, large size classrooms, the lack of updated English teachers who are not generally interested in changing the way of traditional GTM activities, as well as the exclusive use of commercial textbooks to cover syllabus units ignoring in this way the contribution of authentic materials, discourse types and oral language skills to the development of communicative skills.

Implementing TBI to teach English to children at pre-school level could be a complex process for English teachers since very young learners are not linguistically ready yet for complex language tasks. According to Bourke (2006) one of the major challenges found in his study carried out with children of 6 to 8 years old in South Asia was the integration of language input and skills development, since in pre-school children's writing and reading skills develop in a slow way.

Taking into account the mentioned possible advantages and pitfalls to implement TBI in this country along with the analysis of TBI and the Colombian context described throughout this paper, it is possible to affirm that implementing TBI in Colombia is unlikely considering the external forces such as the national policies; language standards and current conditions related to the limited human and material resources and the scarce number of hours that would negatively affect the implementation of TBI in public schools in Colombia.

After looking at both theoretical principles and practical applications, it can be concluded that there are both advantages and obstacles to use TBI in Colombia. Potentialities of implementing TBI in this country are high, teaching through topics could become a teaching alternative to make English learning a more meaningful, motivating, and integrating process, but unfortunately, there are a number of identified obstacles to implement TBI in this country. For this reason, it is necessary to suggest some pedagogical recommendations to implement this communicative teaching method in the Colombian education system.

#### **4. Pedagogical suggestions to implement TBI in Colombia**

To implement Theme-based instruction in an EFL setting like Colombia, it is necessary to take into account the objectives of language standards, the disposition on the part of policies to promote continuity in communicative teaching methods, the context and circumstances in which students and teachers are exposed, the purpose of school curriculum, and students' needs and realities.

Before using a communicative teaching method like Theme-based Instruction in an EFL setting such as Colombia, language teachers need first, analyzing students' realities and needs such as social and cultural aspects, students' location and environment, as well as future plans, carriers, jobs among other learners' needs. It is also important to make a test at the beginning of the course to analyze students' language level. The results of those analyses will be the base to make a list of adequate topics, activities, and tasks, as well as to set the school year goal. For example, in the next school year students will present the ICFES test. Therefore, the school goal and the topics will focus to enhance reading comprehension skills.

Once set the goal and the topics, teachers need to include three important characteristics of TBI in their classrooms: authentic material, aspects of other curriculum areas such as history, mathematics, arts among others, and communication. In terms of authentic material TBI works with a number of discourse types that can be oral or written. Teachers will be able to explore along with their students different types of real language. On the other hand, working with aspects of other school areas provide relevant content and extra activities to complement the English learning making it meaningful, real and motivating for both students and teachers. Finally, teachers need to include communicative tasks such as role plays, work teams, as well as the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), TBI defends the use of the four language skills and communication since this language method is an integrated skilled approach; it not only involves communicative aspects, but also, it enhances in students socio-affective, cognitive and cooperative abilities. Therefore, in a topic-based course it is important to choose activities and topics that enhance communication and language skills.

TBI is a demanding teaching method; therefore, language teachers need to be creative and organized in language instruction and planning. TBI requires teachers to plan a lesson in advance, it is necessary to make a list of topics and activities for each lesson, as well as monitoring students' progression in the four language skills and motivate them to enhance their communicative abilities, reducing pencil tests and increasing students' outcomes. These recommendations are also supported by the practical cases with TBI analyzed through this research paper.

During Theme-based course, students should be involved in choosing topics and the topics should relate to facts that are important for students such as cultural aspects, Colombian life-style, traditional events and celebrations so that learners be familiar with real language and

important facts of their context. The topics should also adjust to the goals of the national language standards. Accordingly, activities should integrate communicative tasks, discourse types, groups of work, authentic material, aspect of other curriculum areas and language skills so that students interact with the language in its natural form and enhance the ability to connect previous knowledge with the new one.

To be successful in the implementation of TBI and compensate for the lack of opportunities to interact with the language in an EFL setting like Colombia, it is important to address homework outside the classroom, to provide real language simulations related to learners' reality, to stimulate conversations, and to create language clubs (Brown, 2001).

It is recommended that at pre-school level, teachers implement TBI in terms of oral skills (listening and speaking) only since children at this level are not linguistically ready yet. Moreover, teachers also need to combine authentic material with the units of a course book to cover the goals of language standards and school curricula.

It is also necessary to consider a continuous assessment process to confirm that TBI really works and evaluate students' progress. Continuity in communicative teaching methods like TBI on the part of national policy makers should be guaranteed. It is also important to know the benefits of implementing communicative teaching approaches in classrooms through seminars or conferences. It is necessary to guarantee more instruction hours, updated teachers and language resources. Cadavid (2003) goes beyond this. The success of implementing TBI in Colombia depends on clear policies, the necessary conditions and continuity on part of policy makers.

In summary, implementing a communicative teaching method like TBI in an EFL setting like Colombia may be a demanding and complex endeavor due to the difficult task of

maintaining progression, continuity, motivation, control, and political concerns about standards, as well as managing administrative issues related to language teaching. However, as it was observed in the previous recommendations for implementing TBI in this county, Topic-Based Instruction is a flexible teaching method that can adjust to any EFL setting's needs and conditions promoting communication and real language use. According to Bourke (2006) the success of TBI implementation not only depends on teaching learners the new language, but rather, on providing the necessary conditions and motivating language experiences to be acquired by students themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the potentialities and characteristics of Theme-based instruction, as well as the Colombian context in terms of policies and conditions, and comparing international with national cases with TBI, it is possible to conclude that the use of Topic-based Instruction in an EFL setting such as Colombia has both benefits and obstacles. Throughout this research paper it has been showed that Theme-based Instruction is an integrated skills teaching method that combines topics and aspects of other school areas providing real learning and cognitive, communicative and socio-affective abilities. TBI can alleviate the lack of ready language opportunities that are absent in an EFL setting. However, these benefits are not enough since external circumstances, standards, language administrative issues and policy concerns that influence English teaching in terms of sustaining continuity and control, managing administrative issues related to language, and curriculum goals may reduce the possibilities of implementing TBI in this country.

It is clear, therefore, that English teaching field not only involves meaningful learning and an integrated skills development, but also, it requires the necessary conditions to be carried out successfully. In order to facilitate the implementation of integrated teaching methods like TBI, it is necessary to guarantee language conditions such as more instructional hours, resources, and updated teachers. On the other hand, it is important to create awareness in Colombian citizens, parents, students and community about the advantages of implementing TBI in language classrooms through seminars and conferences. In terms of teaching, it is required to create situations in which learners involve events and experiences that are meaningful to them such as communicative tasks or any activity that requires students' creativity. Additionally, it is

important to set goals in order to have clear objectives and choose clear topics and activities that adjust students' needs, realities and curriculum's objectives.

In the author's opinion the most important recommendation to implement TBI in Colombia is related to teachers' role. In an EFL setting like Colombia where real opportunities to interact with the foreign language are limited, the teachers' role plays an important function in the learning process since the use of meaningful, coherent and communicative teaching strategies may compensate for the lack of ready communicative situations outside the classrooms and enhance motivation and interest on students to learn another language. A very creative, responsible, organized and motivated instructor provides the necessary atmosphere to create real language, authentic material, interesting students' outcomes and meaningful communication.

As a final point, it is important to conclude that successfully learning not only involves adequate teaching methods, but also, active teachers that stimulate students' motivation adding their lessons aspects of other curriculum areas that provide relevant language content, topics related to students' needs and realities, communicative activities that provide real language input, social interaction that provides real language simulations, language skills and human development, relevant language tasks that stress more attention to intrinsic outcomes rather than explicit paper-pencil tests. Topic-based Instruction could be an excellent tool to provide opportunities to interact with the language in a real form.

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