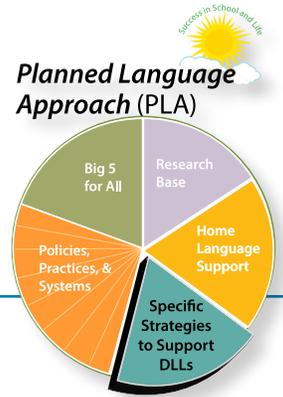


Planning and Organizing Thematic Instruction



Thematic instruction (also called the Project Approach) involves organizing the curriculum around a theme or a rich and engaging topic that crosses all learning domains—for example, math, science, art, social skills, fine and gross motor skills, and receptive and expressive language development. With thematic instruction, a class explores a theme together over a few days, weeks, or months.

Children engage in many different types of activities as they explore the theme or topic, for instance:

- ▶ Reading books
- ▶ Going on field trips
- ▶ Dancing, cooking, or building things
- ▶ Interacting with classroom visitors
- ▶ Drawing, painting, and creating with art supplies
- ▶ Developing charts
- ▶ Counting and patterning
- ▶ Making observations



Thematic instruction supports dual language learners (DLLs)

Thematic instruction supports children to build *schema*—that is, make connections—as they learn because they are approaching a theme from multiple perspectives and using many different resources over time. Children, and especially DLLs, benefit from multiple exposure to new words and ideas because each interaction with a new word or idea builds their understanding.

DLLs in particular learn by connecting their direct experiences to the language they hear during planned activities. Thematic instruction supports children to connect their existing knowledge, which they develop within their culture and family, to new knowledge they are gaining at school.

Examples of themes

Themes should be broad enough to allow children many ways to explore through a variety of learning domains but narrow enough so they can focus their explorations. The following are examples:

- ▶ Bread
- ▶ Dance
- ▶ Bridges
- ▶ Amphibians



How to choose themes

- ▶ Invite families to help choose themes based on their knowledge of their children's interests and experiences.
- ▶ Consider the available resources.
 - ▶ Is a building being constructed across the street? If so, "construction" might be a good theme.
- ▶ Consider the children's interests.
 - ▶ Are the children enjoying stamping their boots in the rain? If so, then "water," "rain," or "shoes" might be good themes to consider.
- ▶ Consider children's likely interests.
 - ▶ If you are expecting the first snow of the season, "snow" might be a good theme, or "cold."
- ▶ Consider the teachers' interests.
 - ▶ If one of the teachers loves to bake bread, that enthusiasm for baking may help make that topic very appealing to children.



Themes should allow children to bring and extend their own knowledge, experiences, and questions. They are a comprehensive, fun way to build on what each child already knows and is ready to learn. When selecting a theme, consider:

- ▶ Does this theme allow for the necessary variety of learning goals across multiple domains?
- ▶ Do children across cultural backgrounds have some knowledge of this theme to build on? If not, plan to introduce the theme in a way that will be meaningful to them from the start.
- ▶ Are there many types of resources available to support children's learning on this theme, such as books, activities, or local experts?
- ▶ How does this theme include children's diverse cultural and linguistic experiences? For example, on a theme of bridges, staff can incorporate bridges in different neighborhoods or countries.



Using thematic instruction

When using thematic instruction, teachers plan multiple opportunities for children to build on what they already know and to extend learning with meaningful, connected activities throughout the day. For example, a theme on bridges may include the following kinds of activities:

- ▶ Bridges are constructed and explored in the block area and at the water table, while outside in the play yard there are materials for building bridges.
- ▶ Stories and informational texts related to bridges, including books that represent different cultures and languages, are read aloud and available for children to explore on their own. Some may be placed in the areas where children are building.
- ▶ Children illustrate observations and thoughts about bridges. Children also participate in dictation activities, during which adults write down what the children say. Together they make a formal class book. Depending on the Classroom Language Model (CLM), the book could be written in English and/or a home language.
- ▶ Math activities include making charts that record the number of bridges the children pass over on the way to school and naming and exploring shapes.
- ▶ Science activities include guided explorations of how to construct bridges that support weight and do not topple.
- ▶ During classroom experiences, family and community members share their knowledge and lead activities related to the theme.
- ▶ During out-of-classroom experiences, children make observations related to the theme or take a walk to a community location to see a bridge.
- ▶ At home, families are involved in activities related to the theme and talk about the theme in their home language. Teachers engage families in talking to their children about the bridges over which they walk or drive, counting the bridges they see, and comparing the sizes and shapes of bridges.



Thematic instruction as it relates to language and culture

Thematic instruction supports children to:

- ▶ Build on their own cultural experiences
- ▶ Share their cultural experiences with others
- ▶ Learn English words for concepts they already know in their home language
- ▶ Learn new English words for concepts they have not yet learned in their home language
- ▶ Make connections between their cultural experiences and classroom curriculum



Family contributions to thematic instruction

Thematic instruction is most effective when staff partner with families throughout the process. Family members can help teachers choose rich and engaging themes, share their knowledge with their own children and in the classroom, and support children to make connections between the theme and their experiences at home and in the community.



Teachers can partner with families by:

- ▶ Involving families in choosing themes
- ▶ Sharing information with families about classroom themes before they begin
- ▶ Encouraging families to use their home language to talk about the theme at home
- ▶ Communicating with parents and family members about the theme being explored so families can build on it at home
- ▶ Providing updates in home languages about classroom activities
- ▶ Inviting families to share their personal knowledge and experiences in the classroom through photographs, music, stories, and key vocabulary in their home language

