


Students' Perceptions of the Pros and Cons of Theme-based Instruction in English Classes

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Theme-based learning, Pros and Cons, English classes, Vietnamese students.

Researchers have investigated theme-based instruction to guarantee the efficacy of language acquisition and disciplinary content in the modern educational setting. In light of this, this study aimed to examine social science students' perceptions of both the pros and cons of theme-based instruction in their English classes. To address the research issues, I used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, such as questionnaires and interviews with 100 social science students at Vietnam National University regarding the use of theme-based learning in the classroom. According to research findings, students' attitudes towards this approach in the course were positive in relation to three key areas: disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences, language acquisition abilities, and learning attitude. Additionally, the research revealed some main challenges students faced when theme-based instruction was implemented in language classrooms, particularly the lack of social science knowledge and the habit of using the mother tongue during class. I hope these findings will serve as the foundation for strategies that best support social science students' English language learning.

Introduction

Given the current globalization trend, English instruction needs to be strategic in the context of integration. While disciplinary-oriented English teaching is regarded as an essential component of general English instruction, it must be communication-focused to support a particular major or career. The audience for disciplinary-oriented English is broad and includes people from all scientific fields, including engineering technology, social sciences, economics, finance, and so on. In modern education, researchers use content-based instruction to guarantee the efficacy of language acquisition and disciplinary content. The term “content” has many different definitions. According to Crandall and Kaufman (2002), it was defined as an “academic subject”. However, Chaput (1993) and Genesee (1994) broadened their definitions. This term does not need to be academic; it can cover any subject that advances

students' knowledge of the language in general and the target language in particular, including non-linguistic topics of interest to the learner (Chaput, 1993; Genesee, 1994).

Among the three models of content-based instruction, the model proposed for this study is theme-based instruction. Theme-based teaching is one of the modern teaching trends, and it is being used in several Asian and global countries with encouraging outcomes (Le, 2021). As themes organize the material, it is easier to learn and remember. The information is coherent and meaningful, and it relates to the learner's motivation and interest and the learner's ability to develop expertise in a subject through a series of complex tasks (Rivers, 1992). According to Brinton et al. (2003), students would become proficient in writing skills, vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure, communication skills, and writing styles (Kavaliauskiene, 2004; Shang, 2006).

At Vietnam National University (VNU), teaching majors in English is given particular emphasis because it is the key to helping students not only have solid disciplinary knowledge but also meet the requirements of using English according to international standards when they enter a professional and competitive working environment in the future. Therefore, disciplinary topics from the basic English teaching levels have been included in the English curriculum. For students of different social science majors at VNU, orienting and helping them become familiar with topics in the social science major right from the time they learn Basic English is extremely urgent. That can help students have a starting foundation when studying disciplinary subjects in humanities and society in the following years of university. This is the fact that inspired me to conduct this research to evaluate the pros and cons of applying theme-based instruction in English classes for social science students.

Literature review

The Concepts of Theme-based Instruction

Theme-based instruction is one type of content-based instruction (CBI) that “focuses on specific themes of interest and relevance to the learners” (Brinton & Snow, 2017, p. 5; Snow & Brinton, 2019, p. 8). Theme-based instruction is seen as a language-driven model of CBI, taught by a language teacher while covering concepts pertinent to the content class (Brown & Bradford, 2017; Lyster, 2018). Other CBI models include the sheltered model and the adjunct model.

The thematic teaching model integrates topical content into the teaching of language skills. The goal is to use disciplinary content materials to improve students' language skills and proficiency (Brinton et al., 2003). In addition, the theme-based teaching model also stands out because language teachers can completely implement it and does not require collaboration between language teachers and disciplinary experts. This model is self-sustaining, flexible, economical, and convenient to build. It can be easily implemented in most standalone programs without making fundamental changes in the program. The special attention to learners' linguistic needs in the theme-based model has the advantage of engaging learners in the same learning group, but with differences in their language proficiency (Cummins, 1992), a common phenomenon in college-level classes (Davies, 2003; Heo, 2006).

This technique is also regarded as a useful strategy that integrates four language abilities to improve the total second language abilities (Brown & Lee, 2015). Webb and Nation (2017) contended that CBI's skill integration can aid second language learners in speeding up their acquisition of incidental vocabulary. Similarly, according to Nation and Macalister (2020), theme-based instruction can also give students several chances to integrate more than one language skill in order to enhance their writing skills. Besides, Snow and Brinton (2019) noted that theme-based instruction is one of the most popular CBI models implemented in tertiary educational settings and can be applied at any level of setting proficiency. Therefore, theme-based teaching is truly the core of content-based teaching. It can be applied to a variety of teaching contexts based on disciplinary content, allows teachers and curricula to control disciplinary content, and can be incorporated into an integrated curriculum with certain add-on programs.

Review of Studies on the Application of Theme-based Instruction in International Setting

In the world, theme-based instruction is a topic that attracts the attention of many scholars. According to Velásquez-Hoyos (2021), theme-based instruction could enable students to increase oral fluency in terms of vocabulary, intonation, and fewer prolonged pauses when speaking English. Besides, the development of students' reading comprehension is also influenced by the use of theme-based language teaching in reading instruction (Wadi et al., 2021). Peng (2022) claimed that students' enthusiasm to study and their ability to read in English both improved with theme-based education. The study also showed that Chinese students could become proficient listeners of English if they get theme-based education, well-designed content, and productive practice (Peng, 2022). Besides, the results of Shibata's (2022) study demonstrated that theme-based instruction significantly improved the lexical diversity in their cause-and-effect essays. With the use of this pedagogy, the participants had numerous chances to obtain materials to enhance their writing skills and develop their understanding of the assigned issues, as well as socio-cultural scaffolding from the teacher-researcher and their peers (Shibata, 2022). Sharing the same opinions, Pan (2022) stated that teaching and learning benefited from the incorporation of a blended teaching style and a theme-based approach in medical English language instruction. By employing phrases in created medical settings and repeating them, students can become proficient in medical terminology related to particular subjects (Pan, 2022). Besides, Wang and Shen (2023) showed the effectiveness of theme-based teaching in English language education.

As regards social science discipline, theme-based instruction has many advantages. Over time, theme-based instruction facilitates students' ability to draw connections between related topics. Because they perceive these themes in isolation from one another, students frequently find it difficult to see the links between historical issues and occurrences. By assisting students in understanding the connections between historical and modern characters and events, thematic teaching helps to solve this challenge (Sheffield et al., 2022). Besides, according to Dilek (2007), thematic instruction is supposed to enhance students' psychomotor, emotional, and cognitive abilities. This method assumes that even though students lack some skills in these areas, they can demonstrate an interest in the subject and apply some particular skills to learn social studies (Dilek, 2007). From these studies, it can be seen that theme-based

instruction is relevant to the social science discipline.

Besides some advantages, a few authors mentioned some drawbacks of theme-based learning. Noviyanti (2022) reported three main disadvantages of theme-based instruction in aspects of teachers, students, and learning facilities and resources. Specifically, teachers' qualities include having a broad intellect, a strong sense of integrity and self-worth, and the courage to package and develop concepts. In terms of the students themselves, the theme learning approach stresses analytical, associative, exploratory, and elaborative skills; therefore, it calls for quite strong learning capacities from the students in both academic and creative domains. In terms of learning resources and facilities, reading a wide range of materials and information sources is necessary for thematic learning, maybe including online resources.

Review of Studies on the Application of Theme-based Instruction in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the application of theme-based instruction has received moderate attention from authors. Tran and Nguyen (2018) investigated the effectiveness of theme-based teaching approaches to physics subjects. The findings showed that through theme-based learning, students could apply their experience, knowledge, and abilities from a variety of subject areas to address real-world issues. Besides, the study of Nguyen (2019) presented the method of building a cross-curricular integrated theme to teach some natural sciences subjects to secondary school students. The results demonstrated how theme-based learning fosters the development of students' practical problem-solving abilities through the integration of information, expertise, and skills from numerous disciplines (Nguyen, 2019). In addition, Le (2021) proposed a five-step process using a variety of techniques to create a biology theme for secondary science education. The theme appears to be reasonably suited for secondary school students, according to the results of the pedagogical experiment. Moreover, Le's (2021) study aims to outline lecturers' perspectives on the use of content-based instruction in teaching legal English. The results demonstrated how the implementation of the theme-based approach aided in students' growth in legal English. Students got the chance to study and practice the target language in a setting where subject-matter expertise facilitated language acquisition (Le, 2021).

Research Gap and Research Questions

As we can see from the literature review, although theme-based instruction is a topic of interest for many foreign scholars, most research only highlighted the advantages of using theme-based teaching in the classroom. The difficulties were hardly mentioned. In addition, in Vietnam, it can be seen that in recent years, scholars have also conducted research on applying a theme-based model to teaching specific subjects. The literature review, however, reveals that the majority of Vietnamese researchers concentrated on studying subjects taught in schools; little research was done on theme-based instruction at the tertiary level. More importantly, although it has been proved that theme-based instruction can be relevant to social science students, few studies in the world have investigated the application of theme-based instruction in the field of social science. Especially in Vietnam, the studies were only related to subjects in the natural science discipline. Therefore, this study was implemented to examine the benefits and drawbacks of theme-based instruction in English classes, accounting

for social science students' challenges while applying this method in EFL classes. The following two research questions can help attain these goals:

1. What benefits did applying the theme-based instruction in English classes bring to social science students?
2. What difficulties did applying the theme-based instruction in English classes cause social science students to encounter?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to choose participants. The study included 100 students majoring in social sciences at VNU, to whom I was assigned as an English teacher at the beginning of the semester. These students come from 4 Basic English classes for social science majors, each of which has 25 students). I chose these groups of students because I was the English teacher directly teaching them, so collecting data and conducting interviews later became more convenient. Furthermore, these four selected classes include quite a diverse range of students from different social science majors, such as history, psychology, tourism, and socialization. These are also the topics that the Basic English program is designed to cover. Therefore, due to the relevance of disciplinary knowledge, the opinions from these student groups can be highly representative of drawing generalizable conclusions. This group of students has an entry level of A2 (equivalent to level 2) according to the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam and aims to achieve the output standard B1 (equivalent to level 3). Every participant is a citizen of Vietnam and ranged in age from 18 to 22.

The purpose of the English program for social science students is to assist them in developing their four core skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - as well as their vocabulary and understanding of subjects related to the social sciences. This course can be regarded as the foundation for students to learn disciplinary English in the following years at university. Therefore, each week, students learned skills with content related to social sciences such as psychology, socialization, communication and media, education, culture, tourism, and so on. Besides practicing four language skills, students also practiced translating texts related to social science topics to increase their knowledge and vocabulary.

Data collection & analysis

To meet the objectives of the research, I combined quantitative and qualitative research methods.

First, since the questionnaire is the primary and most popular means of gathering quantitative data, it was utilized as the major tool to collect accurate and valid data (Taherdoost, 2022). I used the theoretical framework of benefits and drawbacks of theme-based instruction from the studies covered in the literature review to create the questionnaire. To ensure clarity and prevent bias, I also followed Harlacher's (2016) recommendations for designing the questions, including five steps: 1) determining the goals of the questionnaire; 2) defining the information

to address the goals; 3) writing the questions; 4) reviewing and revising the questionnaire; 5) organizing and formatting the questionnaire. Part 1 of the questionnaire includes 12 statements about the benefits of theme-based instruction. These benefits are divided into three key areas: disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences, language acquisition abilities, and learning attitudes. A 5-point Likert scale (totally disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, totally agree) was adopted to reveal participants' attitudes and behaviors. Participants only had to choose the number closest to their opinion; therefore, even those who were not enthusiastic could feel comfortable answering all the questions. Part 2, which is in a tick-box format, consisted of some main disadvantages of theme-based instruction. I proposed some main drawbacks of theme-based instruction for students to choose from (multiple answers can be selected) to investigate which aspects of theme-based instruction students found the most challenging.

Second, I used the interview method to clarify the information obtained from the questionnaire, thereby providing more accurate and reliable data for the research. Since interviews are one of the most promising methods for gathering qualitative data, they were employed as a research instrument in conjunction with the questionnaire to further examine the phenomenon (Taherdoost, 2022). The interview questions were designed to closely follow the content of the two research questions and unclear issues from the information obtained from the survey. I recorded the interview content, grouped the information according to issues, and coded it by students' names for convenient citation in the article.

The acquired data was processed using both statistical and interpretative methods. Initially, the results from the two instruments (questionnaires and interviews) were discussed using interpretive methods. The data obtained from the survey is presented through mean scores along with standard deviation to see the contribution of data around the mean value. To gain a deeper understanding of the gathered data, I contrasted and compared the responses from the interviews in each group. To provide further context, I also displayed my notes of the participants' interview responses as quotes. Secondly, the information was compiled and shown using tables and charts. After that, discussions were made concerning the previous studies covered in the literature review part.

Results/Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: What benefits did applying theme-based instruction in English classes bring to social science students?

To investigate the benefits of theme-based instruction, a questionnaire was used, combined with students' opinions from interviews. The results obtained from part 1 of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Benefits of Theme-based Instruction

Benefits related to disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Learners acquire a comprehension of modern society and culture.	3.75	0.53
2. Learners master disciplinary vocabulary through themes.	4.15	0.50
3. Learners learn disciplinary contents in English	3.60	0.69
4. Learners improve writing skills on disciplinary themes.	3.95	0.51
Benefits related to language acquisition abilities		
5. Learners enhance writing skills in academic English.	4.22	0.73
6. Learners develop English reading and translation ability.	4.35	0.56
7. Learners gain knowledge and ideas for speaking and listening.	4.06	0.63
8. Learners advance structures with theme-based materials.	4.25	0.44
Benefits related to learning attitudes		
9. Learners become confident when reading articles on related subjects.	4.28	0.57
10. Learners feel interested and motivated by diverse themes.	3.90	0.61
11. Learners find reading and listening to English materials by topic easier.	4.11	0.65
12. Learners increase autonomy in researching disciplinary topics.	4.20	0.55

The mean scores in Table 1 vary from 3.60 to 4.35, indicating that students are generally positive about the advantages of theme-based learning. Additionally, every factor showed a low standard deviation ($SD < 0.8$), indicating that the data were narrowly dispersed around the mean.

First, in terms of benefits related to disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences, the two highest benefits in this group belong to mastery of disciplinary vocabulary, as well as improving the ability to write about disciplinary topics ($M = 4.15$ & 3.95). This demonstrates that students had several opportunities to enhance their disciplinary vocabulary when learning English on subjects related to their major. This would help them build their translation and writing skills on related subjects. Students also confirmed these benefits again during the interview. One student said, *“I feel that this English course helps me learn more vocabulary related to social sciences in general. This will be a very good foundation for my major later”* (S1). Another student shared the same idea, *“I feel more confident when writing about specialized topics in English. My ideas and vocabulary are improved through translated readings”* (S2). This finding was aligned with that of Shibata's (2022) study, which revealed that theme-based education led to a considerable improvement in the lexical diversity of the students' cause-and-effect essays. Similarly, Pan (2022) also reported that theme-based instruction enabled students to become proficient in medical terminology related to specific themes. Besides, in agreement, the findings of Nguyen (2022) and Vo et al. (2023) also show that subject-language integration has become increasingly popular in higher education over the past few decades. This approach helps students gain both disciplinary knowledge and language proficiency, and these educational resources can also potentially enhance teaching methods (Kalolo, 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Zhao & Boonyaparakob, 2022).

Second, as regards benefits related to language acquisition abilities, it can be seen that this benefit group has very high mean scores and is quite uniform across aspects (M= 4.06-4.35). The results showed that nearly all students participating in the study agreed that learning English on disciplinary themes is an effective way for them to improve their English skills. It has been shown that students' reading, translation, and grammatical skills can be particularly enhanced by studying English on specialist themes (M= 4.35 & 4.25). Some students shared:

I had a really hard time reading and translating English materials before I started studying English for Social Sciences. However, the program taught me how to read long documents and acquainted me with translated sentences ranging from simple to complicated. (S3)

Even though I studied grammar in high school, I found it rarely applied. When learning English by themes, students can read and understand complex sentence patterns in English, and their grammar knowledge can be improved. I find it very interesting. (S4)

This finding was reported by Wadi et al. (2021), who claimed that theme-based language teaching in reading instruction has an impact on students' growth of reading comprehension. Besides, Wang and Shen (2023) demonstrated theme-based instruction's efficacy in teaching English as a second language, especially in reading and translation. Besides reading, translation, and grammar skills, most of the students also appreciated the role of theme-based teaching in improving speaking expressions and listening comprehension. One student said, *“When studying topics specialized in social sciences, I feel expanded in related knowledge and vocabulary, from which I feel I can talk about more topics related to my major”* (S5). Similarly, Peng's (2022) research demonstrated that Chinese students could also improve their English listening comprehension if they get theme-based instruction.

Third, concerning benefits related to learning attitudes, since this approach gave them greater motivation, enthusiasm, and initiative to study subjects related to their major, students had a highly positive attitude toward theme-based learning. Students acknowledged that theme-based learning made listening and reading disciplinary topics simpler (M= 4.11), and they believed it would help them feel more confident when reading articles on themes that are comparable to those in the curriculum (M= 4.28). This finding was consistent with the study of Velásquez-Hoyos (2021), which asserted that theme-based training might boost students' confidence. However, the difference is that Velásquez-Hoyos (2021) emphasized that students' confidence increased when they became orally fluent in their use of vocabulary, intonation, and short bursts of speech in English, not in reading and listening. In the next two benefits in this group, students were inspired to learn more because they believed the translated texts chosen for the program were highly engaging. Besides, these motivations also helped students improve their learning autonomy in researching disciplinary topics. One student shared, *“I feel very excited when reading documents related to social sciences topics. It helps me expand my general knowledge about the area I am pursuing”* (S6). As mentioned in the study of Vo et al. (2023), students' motivation and involvement are important factors in their learning process. Students must meet the dual objectives of gaining language proficiency and subject knowledge within a theme-based learning and teaching framework.

From these findings above, it is clear that students had a very positive attitude towards theme-based instruction. However, they cannot avoid difficulties when combining learning English skills with topics related to social science majors. Some typical difficulties that students encountered were presented in the next section.

Research Question 2: What difficulties did applying theme-based instruction in English classes cause social science students to encounter?

Some of the difficulties in part 2 of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Drawbacks of Theme-based Instruction

Statements	Percent
1. Learners lack disciplinary knowledge in social sciences.	87%
2. Learners find reading a wide range of reading materials and sources hard.	85%
3. Learners still regularly use their mother tongue during English lessons.	83%
4. Learners lack knowledge in using four basic skills in English.	34%
5. Learners have difficulty understanding English syntax.	25%
6. Learners only focus on passing the final exam.	6%
7. Learners feel unsatisfied with teachers' quality in theme-based instruction.	0%

As can be seen from Table 2, students' lack of disciplinary expertise in the social sciences is the primary challenge that received the majority of their agreement (87%). This leads to the fact that students will not have many ideas or vocabulary to be able to express in English skills. One student explained, "*At the time of studying this English course, my knowledge of social sciences is still limited. Therefore, when I have to talk or write about these topics, I find it quite difficult to use vocabulary and develop ideas*" (S7). Besides, 85% of students agreed that reading from a variety of sources and materials can be challenging for learners. This result was reported in the study of Noviyanti (2022). For thematic learning, students must read various reading materials and information sources, which can be challenging for them (Noviyanti, 2022). Another challenge that also received the majority of students' agreement comes from the fact that students still had to regularly use Vietnamese during class (80%). During the interview phase, I became aware of this difficulty and discovered that there are numerous contributing factors. One student shared, "*The majority of social science and humanities majors take the university entrance exam without English subject*" (S8). Therefore, they likely did not spend much time studying English in high school. As a result, the majority of students lack confidence when it comes to expressing themselves in English in classes. However, according to some researchers (García & Wei, 2014; Zhou & Mann, 2021; Nguyen, 2022), due to the difficulties with those programs, such as being seen as monolingual bias and being a barrier for students who are not fluent in English, using the mother tongue has emerged as a solution to using English as the medium of instruction for non-native English learners. This is also a suggestion for teachers to consider choosing the most appropriate strategy in integrated disciplinary content classes.

Not many students had difficulty handling challenges related to the four basic English skills

as well as parts related to English grammar (ranging from 30%-35%). This finding is confirmed by Le (2021), who claimed that theme-based instruction gives students the opportunity to learn and practice the target language in an environment where disciplinary knowledge promotes language acquisition. In the interview, one student shared more about this: *"I feel that the level of the four skills is quite suitable for us, so we do not find it difficult to acquire the skills during class"* (S9). Another student said, *"I find that translated readings often use complex English vocabulary and sentence structures. I have also learned these structures before at high school. Even though I don't use them much, I still remember the knowledge"* (S10). Similarly, Kavaliauskiene (2004) and Shang (2006) stated that through theme-based learning, students would master vocabulary and grammar structures. This confirms that language and grammar skills are not an obstacle for students when they apply theme-based instruction in learning.

A minor obstacle that accounts for 6% of the problem is that students only concentrated on completing the final exam. I also learned about this challenge through the interview, and students shared, *"Sometimes, I only focus on getting points in the exam and therefore pay little attention to using English"* (S11). It can be seen that some students were only worried about scoring high on the exam, so the learning process was ignored. However, the number of these students is very small in the class. This is a positive result because, besides the goal of achieving good results in the final exam, most students were interested in the learning process to improve both their English skills and disciplinary knowledge of social sciences. Furthermore, no student expressed dissatisfaction with the teachers' theme-based instruction quality. This outcome differs significantly from Noviyanti's (2022) findings, which listed the qualities of the teacher as one of the three primary drawbacks of theme-based instruction. For educators, this will serve as both a motivator and a benefit in determining the best teaching strategies for successful student learning.

Conclusion

This study investigated students' perceptions regarding the benefits and drawbacks of theme-based instruction in English classes for social science students. I used survey questions and interviews to blend quantitative and qualitative research approaches to accomplish this objective.

The results have demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of applying theme-based teaching in language classes for social science students with three main benefits: disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences, language acquisition abilities, and learning attitudes. Among them, the greatest benefits are the development of English reading and translation ability and confidence enhancement in dealing with materials on related subjects. Besides the advantages, there are inevitable difficulties because students do not yet possess the necessary specialist knowledge or proficiency in the target language. Despite these challenges, it is evident that theme-based language teaching related to the social sciences creates a platform for teachers to integrate language teaching and general disciplinary content. At the same time, it allows learners to acquire disciplinary content and language skills at a higher level. Such an

approach can enhance learners' language learning motivation, maximize higher-level language input, and allow students to gain exposure to the target language related to future careers.

Simply put, teaching social science students English is a huge challenge. Teachers need to be aware of the issues that students face and make an effort to address them with practical solutions. Because just 100 students from the classes I taught participated in the study, I believe it to be fairly small in scope. As a result, it is impossible to extrapolate what is noted here to the whole student population. Therefore, if I get the chance to study further research on the application of theme-based teaching in language classes for social science students, I need to conduct more research with a larger number of students to prove the efficacy of this approach and further investigate its potential in EFL teaching and learning.

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