

A Thematically Based English I Course

Christopher Glick

Abstract

For the past six years, I have worked to create original activities that offer students not just communication using target structures and vocabulary but opportunities for analytical and creative thinking as well. Most activities are related to the lessons' themes in order to keep students in one context, thereby allowing them better and lengthier access to their top-down knowledge. This paper will outline the fourteen thematic lessons I have prepared for the English I (E1) course.

A recurring feature of each lesson is the weekly homework: a writing assignment and a short vocabulary list to help students prepare for the next lesson. With a minimum length of only five sentences, each writing assignment is quite brief; however, each requires some thinking about the subsequent lesson's theme. The vocabulary should be studied as homework so that I will not need to spend time explaining it in class. When the next lesson begins, students exchange notebooks, read someone else's assignment, and write a response of no less than three sentences. Responses may be criticisms, compliments, suggestions, or miscellaneous comments. The notebooks are then returned to their owners so the responses can be read. Since this is the first time to implement this "write and respond" homework, the results are not in yet. Vocabulary is tested in random quizzes at the beginning of lessons. Tardy students are thus penalized by missing the points from the vocabulary quizzes.

Each lesson also has a short "Find Someone Who..." activity as a backup measure. This is a list of ten sentences analogous to the lesson topic, such as "____ is an only child." These sentences must be turned into questions that are asked to different students. Thus the preceding example would become "Are you an only child?" If a student answers "Yes," their name is written down, a follow-up question is asked, and its answer is noted. A new student must be found for each question, so there is much brief interaction with peers.

Lesson 1 : Introductions

This lesson begins with a lengthy description of the course and classroom policies. Students can follow my speech on handouts. Perhaps the most important classroom policy is attendance : Four or more absences result in failure. Other noteworthy policies are that students must write explanations of their absences and meet with me for one short personal interview of approximately ten minutes.

After explaining the course, I distribute the lesson's handouts, which include a "Personal Information" sheet containing questions about the students' hometowns, interests, and activities for the day. Question prompts are provided so that students will be able to ask for or about the necessary written information from each other ; for example, to ask about a student's club, the questions "Do you belong to a club?" and "What do you like to do?" are provided. These sheets are filled out in pairs, a slow process that allows me ample time to visit each pair to answer questions or make suggestions ; more importantly, it requires students to use verbally the questions on the sheets, which is practice for the larger activity. When the sheets are complete, they are separated and piled face down on a desk.

The students must now assume the identity of someone else based on the information supplied on a randomly drawn "Personal Information" sheet. The students are given time to read about their new identities. They then look at the "People I've met" sheet that contains eight small boxes into which they will write answers to the questions they ask of other students. After providing some basic phrases for introducing and talking about themselves (the lesson's theme) and concluding conversations, I set them off to meet others, talk about their new selves, and locate their real selves to talk with "themselves," the fun factor. For the remainder of the class, I collect their "Personal Information" sheets and describe one person at random before asking a few students to identify the person I have described based on the information they have written about the people they met.

For homework, each student must write about a family member they respect.

Lesson 2 : Family

After the reading and responding portion has finished, students get into pairs for an information gap (they must work together to fill in missing information) pronunciation activity. Each student in a pair receives a family tree with half the names missing; the names that appear all have either [l] or [r] in them and are marked for gender. Only one name, Leroy, appears on both sheets to be used as a reference point: Students ask about missing names using the known ones. For example, a student might ask “Who is Leroy’s wife?” The answers must be pronounced as correctly as possible to practice the target phone; the names may not be spelled, “katakanaed,” rhymed, or shown. After most of the family trees have been completed, I stop the class to have students check their answers, then repeat the names after me.

The next activity is a short listening passage about my family. Besides listening comprehension practice and reviewing how to ask about a person’s job, character, and interests, this activity helps give students a better idea of me, their foreign instructor. The recording is played twice, after which the students compare answers in pairs. Lastly, I give out the answers.

For the final activity (Glick, 2000), students are asked to create a “dream family” comprising themselves and five famous individuals who can be of any relation. I put a quick example on the blackboard then set them individually to the task for which a box is provided on the handout. Once they create their families, the students take turns asking about then diagramming their partners’ families in the handout’s second box. I model the activity and direct students’ attention to the handout’s prompts about the relations of family members, their jobs, appearances, and interests. These questions are followed by a guess at the partner’s relative’s name. If the guess is correct, the famous relative is written into the partner’s family tree.

The writing assignment is to explain the student’s part-time job; if the student has no part-time job, s/he should explain one they would like to have and why.

Lesson 3 : Part-time Jobs

After the reading and responding portion has finished, students get into pairs. On the lesson's handout is a table of six rows for jobs and four columns: desirability, job title, good points, and bad points. In pairs, the students work to list six parttime student jobs. I encourage them to come up with particularly interesting or unusual ones to provide greater variety and interest. The pair must also list one good and bad point, as specific as possible, for each job. When most of the pairs have completed their lists of jobs and points, the pairs separate: Each student must now visit another to get additional different good and bad points for each job in order to complete the table. The student asking must also find out why the student who has given the second good and bad points would or would not like to have the job in question, which is marked by either a plus or minus.

The next activity is a short listening exercise comprising three dialogues of a person with some certain skills who visits a job placement company to find a suitable job. This activity models the next conversation activity. As with all the listening activities, this one is played twice, after which the students compare answers.

For the second conversation activity, students first list three separate "job skills" they have. To accelerate this process, I give examples while walking around the room helping slow starters. Once the skills have been listed, students mimic the listening activity by explaining their skills to others who then suggest a suitable job and explain their recommendations.

For the final activity, student pairs turn their desks so only one person can see the blackboard; the other student looks at the facing wall. On the blackboard I prepare a list of words, mostly job-related, that the student facing the blackboard must describe in English to their partner. If a word is correctly guessed, the pair moves to the next word and so on. Both members of a pair are given the opportunity to describe and guess.

The writing assignment is either to explain one's life after college or one's life as an elderly person.

Lesson 4 : Future

After the reading and responding portion has finished, students get into pairs for the first activity, pronunciation practice. As in the Family lesson, the students have a list of names that mainly contain the target phones [b] and [v]. The students take turns asking about and trying to pronounce the names clearly to their partners.

Pairs then have a series of discussions in which they play roles as parents facing three different problems with their children. Each member of a pair should suggest individual ideas which are then discussed briefly to select the pair's final decision. Once the three problems have been addressed, the pairs separate to visit other students to compare answers and decide again whose answers are best.

The main activity of the lesson is the survey of whether students will become wealthy. By asking ten questions (e.g., Do you try to save any of the money you earn?), students can determine the relative future success of their partners based on the number of "No" answers. Each question on the survey has a related follow-up question to expand the possibilities for conversation. After counting the "No" answers, the surveyor assesses whether the student interviewed will be wealthy, average, or a failure and, as needed, gives advice on how to spend the money or avoid a penurious future.

The handout for the listening activity has four daily predictions based on blood types. The students must read the four predictions then listen to three different descriptions, like diary entries, of a person's day. Students must listen carefully to decide which three of the four blood types' predictions have been described and in what order.

The writing assignment is to give me a tour of the student's room, a task that requires prepositions to explain locations.

Lesson 5 : Housing and Prepositions

After the reading and responding portion has finished, the students listen to a tour of my office in which I explain where various things are. They follow my talk on a picture of my office and label the various pieces of furniture and such

as I describe them. After playing the recording twice, I ask students to compare answers before giving them out.

The next two activities are essentially the same : In pairs, each student has a picture of a room in which they must place various items ; to do so, they must ask their partner, who has a completed room, where the items go. The two rooms used are a dormitory room and a kitchen. Before the students begin, I have them build a list of prepositions on the blackboard to use as a reference during the activities.

For the final activity, students work in pairs as architects who are designing the ultimate student apartment. They are given some restrictions on size, direction of windows, and where the entrance is, but are otherwise free to plan the layout. Architects must consider how far the apartment is from campus, what services are within ten minutes' walk, and the rent. Once the designs are complete, architects separate to visit their competitors, compare designs, and suggest rents for each other in an attempt to determine whose apartment is best.

The writing assignment is to explain how to cook the student's specialty, even if it is only instant ramen.

Lesson 6 : Food and Eating Out

After the reading and responding portion has finished, the students have a short listening activity in which they must listen to complete the descriptions of three menu items. The recording is played twice and answers compared before I give out the final answers.

The next activity is a short translation of a recipe for mousaka, a Greek dish of eggplant and meat. While the students are working, I circulate about the class helping where needed. After most of the pairs have finished, I give out the English translation.

The choice of the next activity depends on the general proficiency and dynamics of the class. For lower ability classes, there is a listening activity in which the students listen to four customer complaints and fill in a table about the reasons for the complaint and the waiter's response. Otherwise, students are asked to work together in pairs to design the healthiest, cheapest (maximum

price : ¥500), most filling, and most delicious lunch possible that incorporates all four food groups and can only use convenience store items. After most pairs have decided their lunch items, the pairs separate to compare their lunch plans with others and give predictions about how long they can live for if they eat their lesson's lunch for every meal, every day.

While not directly related to the lesson's theme, the main activity requires students to practice the rationale behind and grammar of comparisons. Each student in a pair receives a die to roll up nine objects to compare from a table at the bottom of the handout ; the objects to be compared are tied to semantically appropriate adjectives that will be used in constructing comparisons. Each student will turn their adjective, object, and direction of comparison ("less than," "as X as," or "more/-er than," determined by a die roll) into a question that the partner must answer. For example, "delicious" and "monkey" might become the question "What is more delicious than a monkey?" While the questions might be unrealistic, this adds to the sense of fun and requires the partner answering to think of a credible reason for making their comparison. Here, the student might say, "Curry rice is more delicious than a monkey because it is spicy."

The writing assignment is to explain how the student stays healthy.

Lesson 7 : Health

After the reading and responding portion has finished, students have a listening activity. On the handout are nine pictures of the body in different positions. The students listen to a recording of an exercise warm-up and must number the body positions in the order of the six described in the recording. After playing it twice, I ask the students to compare answers before giving the answers out.

For the next activity, each pair of students works to create a survey similar to that found in lesson four, except this time the students themselves must make the questions that will measure student health (Glick & Holst, eds., 1997). Any question answered affirmatively indicates health. Two questions are already supplied as models on the survey, so each pair must make eight additional questions. The pairs then separate. Students survey up to three

different students and assess those they interview as being fit, OK, unhealthy or “almost dead.” After assessing a student’s health, surveyors must give advice on how the student can improve their health.

The next activity on giving advice on student problems draws heavily from an activity in *New English Firsthand Plus* (Helgesen, 1993), except my version is less medically centered. Students must list three problems they face in their lives, be the problems medical, financial, or social ; each problem is written into its own box on the handout. They then ask their partners for answers that are also written into separate boxes. After these problems and pieces of advice have been completed, they are separated and put into two piles, problems and advice, on two different desks. Each student must then randomly select one problem and one piece of advice. Students ask others about their problems ; if they receive suitable advice, or advice that can be argued to be suitable in some way, they accept it and keep the matching pair of problem and advice. Students who give advice collect a new piece of advice ; students who receive advice collect a new problem. Students continue in this way until all the cards are gone or class ends.

The writing assignment is to write about somewhere interesting that the student has been.

Lesson 8 : Going Places

After the reading and responding portion has finished, a pronunciation activity is next with a list of countries and capitals that have one or more difficult phones in their names, especially [l], [r], [b], and [v]. Each member in a pair must carefully pronounce the place names so that the partner can write the name as correctly as possible.

Students stay in pairs to practice giving directions on a map, another information gap activity. The map of each student in pair has six locations that are unmarked but a list of destinations. The student must ask the partner for directions to each destination, follow the destination on the map, and mark the correct stopping point. After most students have completed the task, they check each other’s maps to see whether they were right.

For the listening activity, students must fill in a flight schedule for three

different flights between Chicago and Las Vegas. The students must write in departure and arrival times as well as the airports where the passenger changes planes. There is one recording between a customer and a ticket agent, which serves as the model for the following activity. The recording is played twice after which the students compare answers.

The final activity is done in pairs with students role playing a customer and a ticket agent, as in the listening above. The customer wants to fly from one point to another and must ask the ticket agent about all possible flights; the agent, using a timetable on the handout, explains the three flight choices, after which the customer must decide which one to reserve. Students then change roles, with the new ticket agent using a new flight schedule.

The writing assignment is to design a vacation package using carefully laid out parameters of cost, where to stay, what to do, etc.

Lesson 9 : Vacations

Instead of reading and responding in notebooks this week, students in pairs show their vacation packages to each other. Using a small table for listing the packages' faults, merits, and possible improvements, the students decide whose vacation package will be easiest to sell to other students.

To prepare students for the task of selling their vacation packages to one another, there is a short listening. One vacation package to Guam is explained twice: the first time just to provide information, the second time with embellishments and encouragements to make selling easier. The students must fill in a table with information about the vacation package and hopefully try to use some of the suggested extensions of their own vacation packages' descriptions.

The main activity has two parts: a survey and selling the vacation package. The survey asks about students' summer or winter vacation plans and ends with an attempt to sell the vacation package by describing it. After the description and any questions, the surveyor should reveal the negotiable price. If they are good salespeople, they record profits made then try to survey and sell to someone else. Students surveyed must answer the questions honestly and, on a separate sheet, fill in a table with information about each of up to four different vacation packages that are offered to them. At the end of the lesson,

the student with the greatest profit is commended.

The writing assignment is to describe an average day in the student's life.

Lesson10 : Student Life

After the reading and responding portion has finished, the students have a short listening about lending and borrowing that models the following activity. The listening is played twice, answers compared, and answers given.

For the activity, pairs of students receive dice to roll four items to lend or borrow from a table of 18 items. Based on an activity in *New English Firsthand Plus*, this activity differs in that dice are used to accelerate the decision process. Once a student rolls an item, he or she asks the partner either to lend it or asks to borrow it. Since all items are socially awkward, such as a toothbrush or boy-/girlfriend, the student asking must have a good explanation for why the item is so necessary. The lender then explains his or her response. While not directly related to student lives, many students are financially strapped, so borrowing from each other is not uncommon.

The next activity, also done in pairs and drawn from *New English Firsthand Plus*, provides practice with real and unreal conditional sentences. Each sentence is related to situations that may be encountered in the course of students' lives. Each student reads a question whose independent clause needs to be changed to either a real or unreal conditional structure depending on the dependent clause. The question is then asked and the response recorded. If the response is in some way deficient, the student asking the question should suggest a different and better response. Each student in a pair has different questions and takes turns answering and asking.

My college life is the subject of the following listening activity. Students fill in blanks with information from a recorded conversation. The recording is played twice after which students compare answers in pairs before I give out the answers. The last activity is a short interview to determine how good a student one's partner is. After asking a series of questions and writing down the answers, each student grades his or her partner as either an A, B, C, or F student. After paired partners interview each other, they separate and report their former partners' answers to someone else. Students listen to the reported

information and write it down. They then give a grade to the student they have just been told about. In this way, every student is graded twice. The students then sit back down with their first partners and compare grades for each other.

The writing assignment is about clubs and circles : To which do you belong and why? Students who do not belong to clubs must explain why and write about what they do in their free time outside class.

Lesson11 : Clubs

There is no reading and responding for this lesson.

Paired students listen to four discussions that describe four different clubs : a world travel club, a French bicycle race and language club, a snake catching club, and a good table manners club. The four recordings are played twice straight through after which the students should compare answers with their partners. After one or two minutes, I give out the answers.

Once the students have the completed descriptions of the four clubs, they have a discussion about which club they would most want to join. A small table is provided for listing the merits and faults of each club as identified by each member of a pair.

Students have heard about four different clubs and discussed how attractive they are. Now each pair will create its own club and visit others' clubs to decide which they most want to join. They must consider the club's name, its main activities, its fees, what members it is seeking, what it does during school vacations, and when, where, and how often it meets. Each pair must also create a small poster for its club.

Once the club has been described and a poster drawn, the pairs must separate : One student stays to explain their club to others ; the other goes to visit and evaluate other clubs. Those students visiting other clubs have a table of information (analogous to that needed to create a club) to fill in for each club visited. They also must decide which of the clubs they visited they would most want to join. After a time, members in pairs exchange places so each student will have a turn explaining their club and visiting other clubs.

The writing assignment is to write about which of the clubs you visited that

you would either most want to join or most want to avoid and why.

Lesson12 : Making Appointments

There is no reading and responding for this lesson.

On the handout students fill in their schedules for the week starting from the day after the lesson. They are encouraged to be specific, such as writing in the names of their classes, instead of simply writing “class.” While the students write, I put a simplified version of my own schedule up on the chalkboard.

When the schedules are complete, I demonstrate the lesson’s phrases and vocabulary, also on the handout. There are phrases for determining mutual interests, deciding when and where to meet, what to do, and confirming appointments. Finally, I model the activity by trying to set an appointment to do something with a student in class ; I take care to ensure that we select an activity, determine a meeting day, time, and (often forgotten by students) place. Keeping the demonstration in mind, the students then try to set appointments with ten other students for ten different activities.

About thirty minutes before the end of the class, I tell the students to sit back down and look at the portion of the handout about cancelling appointments. They will cancel appointments by filling in a note with the reason for the cancellation, an alternative plan, a contact number, and a name ; however, they must not name whom the cancellation is for. I model the activity by writing a similar note on the blackboard then tell the students to do the same, except they must cancel three appointments.

Once most of the students have written their cancellations, they separate the cards and pile them face down on a designated table. Individual students then randomly draw a cancellation and try to determine to whom it belongs ; for example, a student might ask, “Were you going to play soccer with someone next Tuesday night at 7 p.m.?” If the student asked is the intended person, the bad news should be delivered ; otherwise, the asking student should continue asking until the correct person is found. After modelling the activity, I set the students to the task until the end of the lesson.

The writing assignment is to describe a personal possession as carefully as possible without actually naming it. In the next lesson the reader must try to

guess what has been described.

Lesson13 : Describing

After the reading and responding portion has finished, students get into pairs for the last pronunciation activity, a list of animals whose names have troublesome phones. An information gap activity, students ask their partners about missing names ; the partners read the names back, taking care to pronounce them clearly. Once the lists are complete, the students pick six animals each that they then describe to their partners who try to guess which animals are being described.

For the next activity, students write the names of four inanimate objects. The names are separated and piled on a desk, face down. I direct the students' attention to the bottom of the handout, which has a list of common questions to ask when trying to guess what something is, such as "What is it made of?" or "What does it do?" The students should then draw an item from the pile at random and, without looking at it, show it to another student. The student holding the item must try to figure out what it is by asking questions about it ; the student answering should only answer the questions, not say anything more. If the student holding the item correctly guesses it, he or she should draw a new item and continue the activity.

The main activity is describing pictures of people in unusual scenes. Students get into groups of four or five and receive envelopes filled with seven pictures, the same for each group. One student selects a picture to describe in seven or eight minutes to the others who can ask questions about the picture but not see it. After I stop the class, the person describing shows his or her picture to the other students to compare results. The next student then selects a new picture, and the process continues until all students have had an opportunity to describe and draw at least one picture.

The writing assignment is to write about a good friend, including a good physical description.

Lesson14 : Matchmaking

There is no reading and responding for this lesson.

To begin the lesson, students get into pairs for a short interview about character, to find out what their personalities and interests are. All the questions differ from those used in the first lesson, but the information is written down in a table. At the end of the interview, the interviewer should recommend a famous person as a suitable match for the interviewed student. The choice should be explained based on the results of the interview.

The main activity is “Matchmaker” in which the students operate a dating service to find suitable mates for their partners. The first step is to fill in a small chart (one of six) for describing the partner by height, build, character (two adjectives), and interests (up to three). This can be done by interviewing, if needed. The second card is for the partner’s “dream man or woman,” so a brief interview will be necessary. I now distribute dice so that the students can, using tables of heights, builds, character adjectives, and hobbies, create two men and two women by rolling dice. These four people are dating service clients that the students will try to offer to other students. Once the students have created their clients, they separate the cards, a total for each pair of four men and four women. Each pair then separates : One person takes the cards of the partner and the partner’s dream partner along to find a suitable match elsewhere ; the other stays behind to explain the pair’s choices for dating.

Students seeking their partners’ partners need to visit as many “agencies” as possible in order to find the best match. They should ask questions and be told what the choices are, not read them. After about ten minutes, I call time so the students can go back to pick up the best choice ; if it has already been taken, they go get the second best and so on. Once they have a match in hand, they return to their original partner, show the choice they made for the partner, and explain why they made it. The students then change roles and repeat the activity, only with fewer available choices at the agencies this time around.

At the end of this lesson, I collect the students’ notebooks to begin marking the writings and the responses. The students may claim their notebooks after the end of the semester.

These are the lessons of my current E 1 course. While I consider it reasonably well developed, I will continue to adjust it as I see fit. Moreover, I heartily welcome comments and am quite willing to alter content to fit the needs of the university, department, and/or fellow instructors wherever possible. If possible, I would like to see these lessons printed out as a bound volume for students, because this would save class time otherwise spent on distributing materials. It would also provide the students with a tangible record of what they should have learned and of their progress.

Although no exercises have yet been uploaded at the time of writing, I will put all my exercises and activities online at my website, the TEFL Lab (<http://www.ias.tokushima-u.ac.jp/tefl/index.html>), for students who are absent from class, colleagues who would like to see what I am doing in class, and fellow English instructors elsewhere.

References

- Glick, C. (2000). Describing the Dream Family. *The Language Teacher*, 24 (8), 28-29.
- Glick, C. & Holst, M., Eds. (1998). *English On Call : Communicative Medical English*. Sapporo, Japan : Hokkaido University Press.
- Helgesen, M. (1993). *New English Firsthand Plus.* : Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.