

Teachers' Perceived Success and Difficulty in Theme-based Instruction in an English Conversation Program

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A theme-based instruction method was formulated geared to the needs of university students as a replacement for general English conversation courses. Such an innovative approach is rare in Korea and has not been attempted in most universities due to inherent limitations. As they went through the trial period for this approach, teachers experienced struggles as well as accomplishments. This is a case study based on the teachers' perceived successes and difficulties with the new program. Five teachers from the program's science and engineering group participated in the study through structured interviews. Their opinions and experiences are recorded on tape or written on paper, and follow-up information was gathered if necessary. Based on the interview data, a survey questionnaire was constructed for all teachers in the group. Both interview and survey data were analyzed in qualitative and quantitative ways. Implications of the study were drawn from these findings. Five areas were discussed in detail in order to resolve limitations and to use the new approach more effectively: conducting needs analysis, setting up teacher training workshops, compiling in-house materials, carrying on course evaluations, and motivating students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Theme-based instruction is a course made up of "a sequence of topics tied together by the assumption of a coherent overall theme" (Stoller & Grabe, 1997, p. 81). It is also known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and is based on the assumption that language teaching/learning works better when tailored to learners' specific needs. This proposition obviously contrasts with general purpose English teaching/learning a second/foreign language, in which the curriculum aims towards no particular purpose. Stevens (1988) made a distinction between ESP and general ELT when he proposed four absolute characteristics. First, ESP is designed to match specific needs or wants of the learner. Second, it is related to the content of particular disciplines or occupations. Third, it focuses

on relevant activities in syntax, lexis, or discourse. Fourth, it contrasts with general English teaching that has no particular purposes.

ESP can be categorized under two big umbrella terms: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). The former's purpose is study that focuses on learners' academic disciplines. The latter focuses on professional purposes or vocational purposes in work or pre-work contexts. In general, the curriculum of ESP emphasizes practical outcomes in the real world. In recent years, expansion of internal business and science together with globalization has led to a growth in ESP to fulfill the demands of EFL learners. Besides, adult learners generally tend to have their own reasons for learning English, and thus the existence and gradual growth of ESP courses in colleges and universities in an EFL context is not at all surprising (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Johns & Price-Machado, 2001).

This trend also has been applied to the Korean ELT field. Various EAP courses are prevalent in colleges and universities throughout the country, such as reading courses, academic writing courses, and business writing courses. It is also a common phenomenon for big companies and governmental institutions to offer special English courses for various vocational purposes in order to meet the needs of their workers. Thus, it is true that EAP and EOP courses are widespread although this is not overtly recognized in public.

The need for English has gradually increased along with globalization, which has been an important social issue since 1995 in Korea. Korean society appeared to recognize that the realization of globalization is tightly interwoven and dependent on education in the English language. Since then, the pursuit of English education has been heating up across the whole nation. English language teaching in Korea saw a great change in the 1990s. One of the most prominent changes was adoption of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach as the national English curriculum in elementary and secondary schools. Another big change was that in 1995 the Board of Education declared English education obligatory starting from 4th grade in elementary school with the hope that people would become more fluent English users. Two years later, the change was actualized, encouraging both teachers and learners to use their target language in the classroom to develop fluency through various communicative tasks.

Currently, students in a college or university have had six years of English education before entering. These students continue to take compulsory English courses, basically EAP reading or writing courses, along with conversational courses. If they desire more English courses for their specific needs or wants, they can take extracurricular courses offered by a foreign language institute belonging to the college or the university.

As part of an EAP course, content-based instruction has been offered sporadically, but it is very rare. Content-based instruction is a form of language education which teaches learner content through the target language. Examples of content-based instruction can

be found in immersion programs, sheltered English programs, and ESP programs (Hwang, 2002). However, this approach is relatively rare in an EFL context. The main reason is of course teacher availability; it is very difficult to find qualified teachers who can teach a students' content area through English. Hiring a number of foreign teachers whose native language is English is not easy for every college or university in an EFL context. Thus, in reality, finding instructors who also have professional knowledge of students' majors is much too difficult a mission. As a result, a content-based approach has been attempted by a few schools but they mostly gave up these plans. Basically, content-based instruction is thought to be unrealistic and impossible, at least in Korea's present situation. Accordingly, most administrators in schools have not dreamed of trying it.

However, M. University in Seoul started theme-based instruction, another model of content-based instruction in an English conversation program in 2004. In general, theme-based instruction is more common in teaching reading than in teaching speaking. Since theme-based instruction involves content-related topics through the target language, it can be regarded as a weak form of the content-based approach. As expected, it did not run as smoothly as general English programs. Teacher meetings were often held to discuss and find solutions for coping with problematic situations. School administrators were not sure whether they should continue this program or not.

Though there is skepticism about such an unsettled program, a systematic evaluation has not been undertaken. Hence, this paper is a small-scale case study of the program evaluation through teachers' reports on their perceived successes and difficulties while involved in the program. Teachers' reactions to the program can be one of the most crucial variables in determining its success or failure because, after all, teachers take a central role (Li, 1998). This report may offer an inside look at the program. Accordingly, it may provide input for whether theme-based instruction is possible in Korea's present situation. If the new approach appears feasible, it may also offer valuable information for adapting or improving it in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, these findings will suggest a potentially useful direction for colleges and universities that have not yet attempted a theme-based approach.

II. THE STUDY

1. Background

M. University settled on a new approach: a general conversational English course was replaced by a theme-based English course in 2004. This course was designed to use

textbooks and supplementary materials relevant to the students' subject matter. The underlying motivation was that this new approach would be an improvement since it might provide students with content-related information through English, while the former course was run with very general topics in everyday conversation.

Five groups were formed according to major: law and business, science and engineering, liberal arts and education, medicine and nursing, and fine arts and physical education. This case study is based within the science and engineering group, which was the biggest group. Except for one instructor, the teachers in that group did not have any background in science and engineering. Thus, it was to be expected that most of the instructors experience difficulties along with accomplishments while involved in the project.

In fact, this program started out with a potential problem. It was not systematically well-organized or planned. The administrators in charge were not experts in this area. They received the notion of theme-based instruction from the top-level administration of the school, who did not know about theme-based instruction either. They simply had an idea that this new approach might be better since such a program focuses language skills on their subject-related area and thus may prepare students better for their graduate studies or work places in the future. Although top-level and low-level administrators had good intentions, they did not have clearly written objectives to implement this program for the year. It is often true that top-level administration leaves the details of implementation to lower levels. Due to lack of expertise, neither administrators nor teachers really knew how to implement a theme-based curriculum on a professional level. This innovative approach started suddenly at the beginning of the semester without much instruction for the teachers.

2. Participants

All teachers in the science and engineering group participated in the present study. Of ten teachers, five were interviewed and all ten later completed a survey questionnaire. The participants were native speakers from English-speaking countries and originally were hired to teach conversational English, except for one Korean English teacher. The university has traditionally offered two types of English courses, as most other colleges or universities do in Korea: reading and speaking. Reading was generally taught by Korean English teachers and speaking was taught by native English-speaking teachers.

Table 1 shows the backgrounds of the participants. Seven male and three female teachers participated and their ages ranged from 31 to 60 years old. The majority was between 31 and 35. Their experience in teaching English varied from 3 to 10 years. They all preferred to be anonymous, so their names were not mentioned throughout the study.

TABLE 1
Background of Participants

Participants	Sex	Age	Teaching Exp	Degree	Major
1	Male	31-35	9 years	MA	TESOL
2	Male	31-35	3.5 years	MA	Linguistics
3	Male	31-35	7 years	MFA	Ceramics
4	Male	36-40	3 years	MS	Physics
5	Female	31-35	7 years	MA	English
6	Male	31-35	5 years	MA	Economics
7	Male	31-35	9 years	MA	English
8	Male	56-60	10 years	MFA	Poetics
9	Female	31-35	3 years	MA	English
10	Female	36-40	9.5 years	MA	TESOL

3. Classroom Activities

The course was designed to focus on speaking and writing skills. Each class consisted of 30 students from various majors in the engineering and general science departments. In total, approximately 1500 students from these fields took the course during the year. It met three times a week, a total of 4 hours: 1.5 hours twice and 1 hour once. Every instructor was allowed to choose themes relevant to their students and was encouraged to use supplementary materials along with a given textbook. However, as most language classes involve more than the specific skill to be taught, this course also involved other skill areas; thus, it turned out to be a more integrated course. Students listened to tapes or watched videos before getting into speaking activities, and they read scientific materials before getting involved in writing.

A couple of teachers tried to focus more on listening than speaking during the first semester. They let the students listen to tapes and watch videos to provide input on science and engineering topics such as volcanoes, natural disasters, household machines, and hybrid cars. However, they did also engage in some speaking activities such as pronunciation practice and a short oral presentation. The rest tried various speaking activities to supplement listening, such as peer interviewing, role-playing, group presentation, story telling, short oral presentations, and other cooperative work.

Regarding writing activities, most of them tried three kinds of writing activities: a summary, a paragraph, and an essay. Students were asked to read science related materials and to summarize the content. In the beginning, teachers taught how to write a paragraph. They focused on organization by explaining and practicing topic sentences and supporting sentences in order to construct a well-organized piece of writing. Next, they tried an essay, teaching rhetorical structure such as introduction, body, and conclusion. A process and product oriented approach was adopted to teach writing. Students went through several

stages to develop and revise their ideas. In general, either one or two essay assignments were given over the course of the semester. Table 2, produced through a survey, summarizes the most frequently used classroom activities among teachers in the science and engineering group.

TABLE 2
Classroom Activities Used by Teachers

Classroom activities	Number of mentions
<i>Speaking activities</i>	
Peer interviewing	8
Role-playing	6
Group presentation	10
Story telling	3
Short oral presentation	8
<i>Writing activities</i>	
Summary writing	7
Paragraph-level writing	10
Essay writing	7
Free writing	2

4. Data Collection

This case study was conducted at the end of the first year of theme-based teaching. A structured interview questionnaire was created to collect data. Mackay (1978) suggests that this method is very good for gathering information because none of the questions will be left unanswered, the researcher can clarify any misunderstandings in a short time through follow-up questions, and they can get other related information not foreseen when designing the questionnaire. Data was collected by interviewing and emailing. Follow-up interviews were carried out if there were further questions. Other resources, such as course objectives and guidelines, and a course evaluation questionnaire were used for analyses. Based on the interview data, a survey questionnaire was constructed in two months. In other words, the results of interview data from the five participants provided a good base for specific items of the survey questionnaire for all the teachers in the group.

III. RESULTS

Both interview and survey data were combined in order to analyze the teachers' opinions in qualitative and quantitative ways. Their replies were compared, synthesized, and organized in order to present their experiences with this new approach to teaching. The

results were mainly discussed based on interview data from five instructors. Survey data was attached as shown in Table 3 to support the interview results by presenting all instructors' opinions in a quantitative manner. In other words, the survey results were appended as evidence that the five instructors' thoughts were representative of the view of the whole group.

TABLE 3
Teachers' Reported Difficulties in Theme-Based Instruction

Difficulties	Number of mentions (total 10)			
	Never	Little	Some	Very Much
<i>Teacher-related difficulties</i>				
Lack of background knowledge	1	4	2	3
Lack of training on how to implement	1	7	2	0
<i>Student-related difficulties</i>				
Students' low English proficiency	0	2	6	2
Students' lack of motivation	1	1	7	1
Students' different educational value and attitude toward learning	0	4	5	1
<i>Theme-based curriculum-related difficulties</i>				
Finding appropriate textbooks	0	0	3	7
Assessing students	0	7	2	0
Evaluating course	1	3	6	0

1. Difficulties Related by Teachers about Themselves

Two types of possible difficulties for teachers were investigated: lack of background knowledge; and lack of training in how to prepare and implement activities in the classroom. First, the teachers were asked whether they had difficulties because of deficiency in background knowledge in science and technology. In the interview, three teachers reported that they had some problems due to limited knowledge in this field, which caused a lot of extra work as they familiarized themselves with relevant concepts. There were occasions when they were unable to answer students' questions on the subject matter quickly. One teacher commented that he was learning the material at the same time as his students at some points. However, two teachers responded neutrally. One teacher reported that the material was a little challenging but that it was not beyond his ability to work out. He actually enjoyed dealing with new and interesting topics and learning them at the same time. The other teacher, who had relevant background, said he did not feel any difficulties. His students were freshmen beginning their studies, so he tried to put some general content into his lessons, and it was not any trouble at all. The survey data also indicated the information that nine teachers who did not have relevant background

knowledge, as presented in Table 1, seemed to experience some obstacles while trying to deliver content.

Second, teachers were asked whether they had trouble preparing and implementing activities for the course due to lack of training in the theme-based approach. It appeared that their lack of training did not hinder them a great deal in finding techniques or methods in teaching, as shown in Table 3. According to the survey, seven out of ten participants responded that they felt only a little difficulty in preparing and implementing activities. The interview data revealed that they were able to find some teaching techniques and tips by communicating and interchanging ideas with other teachers. The Internet was another solution for getting additional teaching ideas. They reported that they improved as time went by, and the second semester was better than the first. This is probably because they began to integrate more language skills into the class. In other words, they did not enter so much into real content due to lack of knowledge; instead, they focused on language skills and more general content that they could deal with.

2. Difficulties Related by Teachers about Their Students

Next, three areas of difficulties students experienced were investigated: students' low English proficiency; their lack of motivation in the theme-based approach; and their different educational values and attitudes toward learning. The first question concerned students' English proficiency. According to the interview data, four teachers agreed that students' levels of proficiency were not really high enough to deal with theme-based materials. The students were not ready to discuss carrier content in English. They did not have enough vocabulary to discuss their subject related topics.

Two teachers mentioned that the broad range of students' English ability was a more serious drawback. They said if the students were at a uniform level, they could tailor the lessons, but it was not possible with mixed levels. One teacher argued, however, that students' proficiency was adequate for the content materials. He further suggested that since they seemed to have quite a large academic vocabulary, it might have been easier for them to discuss and write with their carrier content. The survey data also points out that the students are not ready for theme-based instruction. About eight teachers responded that they had some to much difficulty due to students' low proficiency.

The second question regarded students' lack of motivation within a theme-based approach. In the interview, four teachers reported that students were not motivated. One teacher said that students in first year were burned out because they had just come from a difficult high school, so they often showed little motivation or discipline at university in general, not particular to the theme-based approach. He further mentioned that it would be much easier to teach higher-year students who had had equal preparation. Two other

teachers reported that students were not interested in content-themed activities and preferred more general topics. A minority of students, who probably liked their specialty, appreciated content-related themes. The other teacher said that since the students do not begin their major courses until sophomore year, having theme-based English in their freshmen year was not all that helpful.

Unlike the previous four teachers, one teacher argued that students had motivation, but appeared to be anxious about the challenges. He mentioned that in their self-evaluations, writing, and private communication, they usually reported a strong desire to participate, but a strong fear held them back. This fear can usually be overcome by providing safer opportunities for participation. In other words, the students can be motivated if they have a lower affective filter. According to the survey data, more than eight teachers mentioned that their students, in some degree, were not motivated in the theme-based class.

The third question involved whether different educational values and attitudes toward learning caused any difficulties in teaching. In the interview, one teacher said he did not notice any remarkable differences among his students. However, four teachers reported that students' behavior was likely to have been influenced by different cultural and educational values in the classroom. They mentioned that students seemed hesitant to participate in classroom activities and were more comfortable listening to their teachers. They attributed this to their education before reaching university; students mostly expected to listen, memorize, and take exams. They further mentioned that the students lacked general college study skills. They did not know how to organize their learning materials, such as handouts and supplementary materials. They did not know how to take notes effectively or how to elaborate or simplify their ideas.

One teacher said Korean secondary school students are used to rote memorization followed by an exam and are therefore not used to western methods of instruction, either in general English or in theme-based English. Another teacher said most of his students seemed much more concerned with grades than with any abstract conceptions of learning, so he tried to set up the class so that the amount of effort put in was reflected in their grade. The other two teachers suggested that students seemed careless and unfocused solely because they were freshmen. They said students at the beginning of their careers often do not think English is very important. On the whole, the survey also showed that all teachers thought Korean students have different attitudes and values toward learning than western students do.

3. Difficulties Related to the Theme-Based Curriculum

Following student-related difficulties, obstacles related to the theme-based approach were examined. Three matters were queried: finding appropriate textbooks or teaching

materials; student assessment; and course evaluation. In the survey, all the teachers agreed that it was very difficult to find an appropriate textbook: seven teachers marked “very much” and three teachers checked “some” regarding difficulty in finding appropriate textbooks. In the interview, one teacher said that it is hard to find good ESP textbooks, not only in Korea but throughout the world. There just aren’t many science or engineering related EFL theme-based books on the market. Another teacher said that even if he found a related textbook, it was not comprehensive for the purpose of the course. All five teachers further mentioned that they undertook considerable selection and adaptation of the textbook activities. In addition, they all ended up using their own supplementary materials from reference books or the Internet.

Everyone agreed that the Internet was a good source but that the process of finding and adapting relevant materials was very time consuming. They further reported that once they got appropriately themed materials, developing or adapting them into course activities was not a big problem except for time constraints. Though they had no training in this area, the problems presented were not much different from those in a general English course. They often created exercises for discussion, grammar exercises, and vocabulary activities with the given content. In short, developing theme-based materials was not much different from materials development for a regular English course.

Second, regarding assessment in theme-based instruction, two types of evaluation were addressed: student assessment and course evaluation. As shown in the survey of ten teachers, three teachers tried to evaluate both language skills and their carrier content, and the rest only evaluated the students’ language skills. In the interview, each teacher appeared to have his/her own ways to assess students. There was not a clearly stated direction on how to assess students and neither was there consensus on this issue. For example, students would be asked to write an essay on material from their major related topic. Their writing was graded based on their writing skills, just as it is in a language class using scientific content. Some content vocabulary might appear on tests, but mostly was not focused on. One teacher reported that he tried portfolio-based assessment in the second semester to see if it was more effective. Another teacher mentioned that he did not feel that he had a mandate to test the content area. In general, the teachers did not have much difficulty assessing their students because they mostly focused on language skills, not content.

Regarding the course evaluation, teachers had problems about what to ask in the questionnaire. Since they did not have organized objectives, it was not clear what to list. The interview data uncovered that even though a few teachers in the group made a questionnaire to assess how effective the course was, in general the questions were not specific enough to gather useful feedback about the course from the students except for a few items, such as textbook, workload, materials, and class atmosphere. In other words, the teachers created the questionnaire by putting in items they felt like asking without any

specific guidance. The survey data also suggested that the evaluation questionnaire could not provide sufficient and specific enough information on how the course went: six teachers indicated that they experienced some difficulties.

4. Teachers' Perceived Successes

While overcoming various obstacles in the new approach, the teachers reported that they also experienced successes in their teaching as shown in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4
Teachers' Perceived Successes

Teachers' Perceived Successes	Number of mentions
<i>Student-related successes</i>	
Increased content-related vocabulary	8
Were able to write a paragraph and essay utilizing their content vocabulary	5
Showed progress in presenting their ideas	7
<i>Teacher-related successes</i>	
Got familiar with science and engineering concepts and terminology	8
Gained some confidence in dealing with the content and activities	8

The students showed their improvement in three areas. First, they were able to learn quite a number of scientific concepts and phrases. One teacher commented that the students showed vocabulary development as they were exposed to many subject-specific words and terminology. Consequently, this made them see English as a component of their major studies rather than simply as something tacked-on. Second, they were able to write a paragraph and an essay using their content vocabulary. They were assigned to pick their major related-topics and to write about them. They showed improvement in organizing the paragraph and essay and could express their ideas about a chosen science- or engineering-related topic, although they still had problems with sentence structure.

Third, the students showed progress in presenting their ideas in front of the class. Three teachers reported that since anxiety seemed a big barrier to speaking, they had tried techniques to ease students' tension so they would feel more comfortable speaking out. As time went by, the students were able to deliver a short presentation in their content-specific topics. It appeared that the learned content-related words and phrases facilitated this progress.

Along with their students' successes, teachers also enjoyed personal improvement. They became familiar with science and engineering concepts and terminology and thus could communicate this information to their students. They gained some confidence in

dealing with their students' carrier content and activities as the year went by.

5. Teachers' Overall Opinions about the Innovation

Finally, the teachers were asked to provide their overall opinions about the innovative approach. On the whole, the results of the survey indicated that a majority of the teachers strongly agreed that a theme-based approach was worth trying for the students. According to the interview, two teachers said that theme-based instruction would benefit students in the long run, but they still found it a little difficult because they are language teachers who do not have specific knowledge in the subject matter. Moreover, the proficiency levels of some of the students were low for a theme-based course. These low level students first needed more focus on basic language skills. They suggested that if the program began after one year of a general English course, it might be more effective. In that case, the theme-based instruction would run parallel with their major study, so they would be likely to have more motivation. Besides, the students would be better prepared for the content-related English course because of having taken the previous general English course.

The rest of the teachers appeared to be comfortable with the program beginning in the students' freshmen year. They said this new approach is worth trying and mentioned two reasons. First, students need to prepare for their future studies or career. They should be exposed as much as possible to major-related English and content. Earlier exposure to important ideas and structure in content-related English may not only improve their language skills but also broaden knowledge of their majors. One teacher also indicated that theme-based instruction could make the students engage meaningfully with English. Language learning is likely to take place as long as students are engaged, so teaching relevant skills to their specific needs may foster their interest and engagement. This, hopefully, would eventually lead them to develop their language skills at the same time.

Second, one teacher indicated that textbooks designed for conversational English are often reductive, unrealistic, and nauseatingly saccharine. Instead of continuing to learn English with those traditional texts, university level students need to be treated like intelligent beings and take learning foreign language learning more seriously. Also, if there is any possibility of using more high-level texts as subject content, then teachers should try teaching them.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

A report on theme-based instruction by teachers in the science and engineering group

might be applied to other groups with different majors. What the teachers experienced with regard to their own lack of expertise, the students' abilities and attitudes, and teaching with an innovative approach, could be similar for teachers in the different groups. It seems that difficulties exist across the board in adopting a theme-based approach in the present situation in Korea. These obstacles must be overcome as much as possible in order to gain the full benefits of a theme-based approach, for the sake of both teachers and learners. In the following discussion, five problematic areas are chosen based on the findings of the study: conducting needs analysis; setting up teacher training workshops; compiling in-house materials; carrying out course evaluation; and motivating students.

1. Conducting Needs Analysis

First, needs analysis has to be conducted in order to develop a clear picture of what teachers need in order to prepare for their students. John and Dudley-Evans (1991) define "learner needs" as the "identifiable elements [in] the students' target English situations (p. 299)." Their rationale is that if teachers know the needs of learners, they are more able to provide them with what they actually require in their discipline or professions by addressing these needs in the course syllabus (Johns, 1991). In this sense, needs analysis is the first stage in ESP because the whole curriculum is guided by learner needs. Dudley-Evans (2001) claimed needs analysis as a key feature in ESP. In other words, based on needs analysis, a syllabus is designed, materials are selected, teaching is implemented, and course evaluation is carried out. Thus, the function of "needs analysis is the process of establishing the what and how of a course" (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998, p. 121). It involves surveying students about their personal backgrounds, goals, needs, wants, and lacks before the course begins. It also encompasses collecting information by consulting students' major departments to obtain more precise information about the target situations (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998).

However, the theme-based program at M. University did not have any information about the students except for their class standing and majors. The program administrators did not investigate learners' needs, which is a crucial part of the program. The main reason could be that the administrators simply did not know what needs analysis is and its importance. In fact, investigating students' needs is still a new idea in ELT in Korea. In general, instructors assume their students' needs, and based on their assumptions, the course is planned and carried out. Consequently, all the teachers in the science and engineering group overlooked needs analysis, probably for lack of awareness.

On this traditional basis, the head-teacher in the group prepared the written objectives for the group members. According to his objectives, the course is geared to offer theme-based speaking and writing instruction for intermediate level students as described

by ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. It includes more specific objectives in four skill areas with examples of relevant or suggested activities for spring and fall semesters. Along with these guidelines, scientific content was stressed as indicated below:

As this course is to be theme-based, teachers should incorporate scientific content into their courses... The type of material chosen will be based in both the textbook as well as outside material that the teacher selects. In choosing theme-based material, the teacher should be conscious of its scientific basis as well as its level of difficulty for the students to comprehend (p. 5).

This is a created objective through assumed students needs. In other words, it is not derived from data collected by investigating actual needs. Also, if it had been based on actual data, then the objective could have been broken down in detail. The head-teacher reported that he did not have a clear idea how to carry out the needs analysis and additionally that he had only a few weeks to prepare for the group. Along with time constraints, he could not speak Korean, so he also would have had language barriers when consulting the department if he had tried to carry out the needs analysis.

The program certainly needs to gather data from students and departments in order to obtain more realistic learners' needs. Doing surveys of higher-year students in their major study may be a good idea, instead of only gathering information from freshmen who are not yet involved in the program. As a couple of the teachers mentioned, freshmen seemed not to know what they really want out of an English course. They often are likely to respond that they would like to have fun and become fluent. Asking higher-year students is more likely to result in information closer to realistic needs. It might be a good idea to conduct interviews with several higher-year students in order to come up with questionnaire items that could calculate their needs more precisely. In addition to these data, gathering data from major departments is also necessary in order to have a more comprehensive picture of their needs. When consulting students' major departments, a bilingual teacher should be present in order to mediate communication between the two departments efficiently. Needs assessment should be conducted systematically before the course starts so that the curriculum can be designed more effectively.

2. Setting up Teacher Training Workshops

Second, teacher training is required in order to make teachers more confident in the content-related field. Teachers' confidence is an essential component for the success of the program. A majority of the teachers reported that they experienced difficulties due to a lack of content knowledge in the science and engineering fields. The ESP literature often states

that a teacher is not the primary knower of the carrier content and that teachers can draw on students' knowledge of the content in teaching. Furthermore, it encourages them to take risks in their teaching, but acknowledges that having prepared as much as possible is more likely to make them efficient in carrying out the course successfully (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998). However, at least some familiarity with the learners' subject area will be valuable (Johns & Price-Machado, 2001). The more they prepare, the more they will feel confident in teaching.

Attending a workshop before the course begins would be very beneficial for the teachers who have no carrier content background. The workshop may provide overall relevant information about what kinds of major related subjects the students will be learning, what activities and assignments will be given, and what they will be doing in the near future. Listening and talking to a couple of professors and administrators from the department would be an important source for an overview of the students' needs. It would be a good idea to get textbooks from the department and look through the content to come up with course themes. By doing this, teachers may find general themes from various branches of science and engineering. The more they know about the students and the course material, the better they can prepare.

3. Compiling In-House Materials

Third, compiling in-house materials is necessary for efficient teaching. Dudley-Evans (2001) indicated that there simply is not a vast amount of published ESP materials on the market, unlike general English course materials. Dudley-Evans and John (1998) stated the following, pointing out how hard it is for ESP professionals to find appropriate textbooks:

It is rarely possible to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material, and sometimes no really suitable published material exists for certain of the identified needs (p. 14).

The teachers in the study also mentioned that finding an appropriate textbook was very difficult and that they had used their own supplementary materials to compensate.

Dudley-Evans and John (1998) also pointed out that one important role of an ESP teacher is as a materials provider. Being a teacher involves "choosing suitable published material, adapting material when published material is not suitable, or even writing material where nothing suitable exists" (p. 15). The participants in this study also reported that they were involved in adopting, adapting, and creating course activities. They mentioned that they had some ideas for designing the activities but that the process was very time consuming. Therefore, compiling in-house materials is definitely needed. If all

the teachers compile and share in-house materials, it will be very efficient and effective when selecting course activities for teaching. As they revise in-house materials, they will eventually come up with more suitable activities as time goes by. By attaching simple instructions on how to use these activities in class, these in-house materials will be very good resources which all the teachers can share.

4. Carrying Out Course Evaluation

Fourth, a course evaluation needs to be carried out in a systematic way. A course evaluation is an indispensable part of a language program because it determines the worth of the course. Brown (1989) stated that “evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants’ attitudes within the context of the particular institutions involved” (p. 223). Dudley-Evans and John (1998) suggested that evaluation can be very constructive because it can bring optimal changes. Evaluation can take place in quantitative or qualitative ways. Checklists and questionnaires are quantitative measures; in general, questionnaires are used. Constructing a good questionnaire is not easy, so it needs to be piloted to come up with a valid measurement. The limitation of questionnaires is that students cannot offer answers as to why or how on the questions. Qualitative methods such as informal interviews or discussions may compensate for this flaw since responders provide reasons or solutions for their responses. They may offer “insights into how activities went, what was most beneficial, where difficulties arose, what else they would like to cover” (p. 137). Based on this, the course can be constantly refined and eventually evolve into the best course possible.

The science and engineering group conducted a course evaluation near the end of semester, but the questions were not well enough constructed to get a comprehensive picture of how well the course went. The question items were general mainly because there was not a clear syllabus due to the deficiency in needs analysis. However, the questionnaire uncovered some useful findings about textbooks and items such as amount of workload, how useful and helpful the materials were, and classroom atmosphere. The students indicated that they did not enjoy the textbook at all but they could not provide further information, leaving the teachers to assume reasons since this was a questionnaire-type assessment. Thus, teachers formed a clear idea of whether they should continue to use the textbook or not. Besides, the findings of the evaluation provided some general information such as to what extent the load of assignments was adequate, the materials used were helpful, and the class atmosphere was comfortable. However, it appeared that the course evaluation needed to produce more specific information in order to be helpful for future courses. Along with gathering information for needs analysis, constructing a valid

evaluation seemed likely to determine the success of the program. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment appeared needed in order to collect a more comprehensive view of the course. For example, interviews with students may provide more detailed facts, while a questionnaire survey may offer more general information about how the course went.

5. Motivating Students

Fifth, finding ways to motivate students is also important for carrying through the curriculum successfully. One reason students were not much motivated in the class could be that the program was pre-existent, which means they had not started their major study at the time of the theme-based course. Dudley-Evans and John (1998) claimed that having some subject or professional knowledge before or at the same time as the theme-based instruction would be an advantage in teaching. It would have been better if students had had some experience in their related field by the time they began the course. It appears that a course designed to become beneficial later is less likely to motivate learners compared to one that addresses immediate needs. Thus, instead of offering the course in their first year, running the theme-based course either in the sophomore or later years when students get into their major courses could be one solution.

Students' levels of proficiency could be another factor causing lower motivation. If there are a number of students who cannot deal with theme-based instruction due to lack of proficiency, it might be better to wait until they gain appropriate levels. Although the students had had six years of English education before entering the university, their speaking skills and writing skills were rather low because the CLT approach was a prescribed methodology hardly ever practiced in a real classroom situation. As a couple of teachers mentioned, the program should be two years instead of one year. Teachers need to teach students basic conversational and writing skills in the first year so that they can be well prepared for the second year of theme-based instruction. Of course, this will not be easy because altering the curriculum is a very complicated process involving budgets and decisions by top-level administration. However, the administration needs to consider this challenge for the sake of more effective English education.

Different values and attitudes toward language learning on the part of students, such as passive participation or neglecting assignments not relevant to their grade, can be seen as low motivation by teachers who come from different cultures. A couple of teachers mentioned that the students appear to enjoy new ways of learning English from native English speaking teachers, but sometimes they don't seem to take it seriously, probably due to different views on learning. Because the students have studied English in a more or less traditional fashion previously, teachers need to reorient them to the appropriate role of a

learner in the communicative language teaching classroom (Li, 1998). As time goes by, the students may become accustomed to the new environment and expectations, and eventually and gradually their attitudes may change.

V. CONCLUSION

Adopting an innovative curriculum appears to produce various obstacles as well as interrelated factors. This study uncovers teachers' perceived difficulties as well as their successes in a theme-based program at a university in Korea. The rationale behind this case study is that teachers' reactions to new approaches are very important. As Li (1998) claims, the perceived feasibility of a new educational system can be a decisive factor in the success or failure of the innovation. Many researchers and practitioners have the view that teaching English for a specific purpose will gradually increase in the future following demand in the ESL/EFL teaching context. Cummins's (1984; 1989) notion of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) supports theme-based instruction for learners who have succeeded in learning Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). He claimed that most L2 learners pass BICS within a short period of time, but these language skills are not sufficient for those who want to succeed in an academic or professional context in the future (e.g., Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Johns & Price-Machado, 2001). Thus, once they pass this stage, they need to get into CALP in order to satisfy their complex educational/professional needs. However, just moving on to the next level approach may not bring satisfactory results. A program must be carefully planned and systematically organized to carry out the new approach.

Overall, the findings of this study showed that theme-based instruction is worth trying and feasible, but it needs more work in order to give optimal results. Regarding course design, Dudley-Evans and John (1998) stated that there could be relatively large changes in initial revisions, but refinements to the course need to follow. The article suggests that an optimal course design may evolve through changes and adaptations over a period of time. The implications drawn based on these findings need to be considered in order to refine the program in the near future.

However, this case study has its own limitations. The findings listed in the present study are not exhaustive because the program evaluation was not comprehensive. It would have been much more persuasive if the study had also investigated the other groups and compared results. Thus, it certainly would be worthwhile to investigate teachers in other groups to gain an overview of the program because this may allow comparative findings. A more comprehensive study may lead to more decisive conclusions. Moreover, considering that the students are another important variable for the success and failure of

the program, their opinions on the course need to be investigated in order to reach a more precise course evaluation.

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APPENDIX A

Structured Interview Questionnaire

I. Participants' background information

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Major:
4. Degree:
5. Teaching experience in total:

II. Classroom activities

What kinds of activities have you tried?

1. Speaking activities:
2. Writing activities:

III. Teachers' perceived successes while teaching the course

1. Teacher's successes:
2. Students' successes:

IV. Teachers' perceived difficulties while teaching the course

1. Difficulties related by teachers about themselves
 - a. Did you experience any difficulties due to lack of background knowledge in science and technology?
 - b. Did you experience any difficulties due to lack of training in theme-based teaching method?
2. Difficulties related by teachers about their students
 - a. Did you have any difficulties due to students' low English proficiency?
 - b. Did you have any difficulties due to students' low motivation for theme-based instruction?
 - c. Do you think that Korean students have different educational values and attitudes toward learning compared to American students?
3. Difficulties related to the theme-based curriculum
 - a. What are your experiences with finding appropriate supplementary materials?
 - b. Did you have difficulties evaluating your students because you were not sure how to assess students' performances in a theme-based approach?
 - c. Did you think the course evaluation form was formulated appropriately to receive useful feedback for your course?

V. Overall opinions about the program

Do you think the theme-based program is better than a general English program for the students?

Do you think it is worth trying for the students?

APPENDIX B

Survey Questionnaire

I. Participants' background information

- | | | | | |
|---------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Age: | <input type="radio"/> 26-30 | <input type="radio"/> 31-35 | <input type="radio"/> 36-40 | <input type="radio"/> 41-45 |
| | <input type="radio"/> 46-50 | <input type="radio"/> 51-55 | <input type="radio"/> 56-60 | |

2. Gender: Male Female
 3. Major: _____
 4. Degree: _____
 5. Teaching experience in total: _____ years

II. Classroom activities

Check the activities you tried in the classroom.

Regarding Speaking activities:

- role-playing
- story telling
- peer interview
- group presentation
- short oral presentation
- others if any _____

Regarding Writing activities:

- summary writing
- paragraph-level writing
- essay writing
- others if any _____

III. Teachers' perceived successes while teaching the course.

Check the relevant items.

- Students showed progress in presenting their ideas.
- Students increased content-related vocabulary noticeably
- Students were able to write a paragraph and essay using their content vocabulary.
- Teachers became familiar with science and engineering concepts and terminology.
- Teachers gained some confidence in dealing with the content and activities.
- Others if any _____

IV. Teachers' perceived difficulties while teaching the course

Difficulties related by teachers about themselves

1. I experienced difficulties due to lack of background knowledge in science and engineering.
 never little some very much
2. I experienced difficulties due to lack of training in theme-based teaching methods (in how to prepare and implement activities).
 never little some very much

Difficulties related by teachers about their students

1. I experienced difficulties due to the students' low English proficiency.
 never little some very much
2. I experienced difficulties due to the students' lack of motivation for theme-based activities.
 never little some very much
3. I experienced difficulties due to students' different attitudes toward learning.
 never little some very much

And check the relevant items below.

- My students lacked general study skills.
- My students were hesitant to participate.
- My students were unfocused in the class.
- My students were more concerned with grades than learning.
- Others if any _____

Difficulties related to the theme-based curriculum

1. I had difficulty in finding an appropriate textbook for my students.

never little some very much

2. I had difficulty in assessing my students.

never little some very much

And also check the relevant items.

I assessed language skills.

I assessed content and language skills.

3. Regarding our own science and engineering group evaluation form, I received sufficient feedback from my students through the course evaluation.

never little some very much

V. Overall opinions about the program

1. I think the theme-based program is better than a general English program for our students.

never little some very much

2. I think the theme-based program is worth trying.

never little some very much

Applicable levels: tertiary education

Key words: theme-based instruction, content-based instruction, ESP, EAP

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