Tying Theme-based English Materials to the Four Strands
— A Method of Teaching English to University Students in Japan —

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Abstract
Students and teachers alike can benefit from theme-based English instruction in the university classroom. In theme-based instruction, English is learned through communication about topics. In this paper, ideas are given for how to create theme-based language learning materials. This paper also looks at how to teach with the materials through applying the principle of the four strands of language learning. The four strands of language learning, according to Nation (2007), are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Texts from four themes designed for a practical English class at Hokuriku Gakuin University are referred to throughout this paper as examples. These four themes are Helen Keller, the mountain K2, pioneers in Major League Baseball, and the beginning of apple production in Aomori prefecture. Each of these four themes is linked to Japan in some way. Texts from the themes are given in the appendices.

Key Words: theme-based instruction / four strands / content-based materials

Introduction
Theme-based lessons are an enjoyable and effective option for English instruction in the university classroom. Creating materials is a necessary part of theme-based instruction. This paper will look at how to make theme-based materials. This paper will also look at how to teach with the materials through applying the principle of the four strands of language learning. Four themes that were covered in a practical English class at Hokuriku Gakuin University are referred to throughout this paper as examples. Texts from these themes are given in the appendices. It is hoped that what follows will spark the imagination for possibilities in the area of theme-based language instruction.

What is theme-based language instruction?
Theme-based instruction is a form of content-based teaching. It is centered on topics, or themes. Interesting content about various topics provides the foundation from which the language instruction is built upon (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). The themes covered over the course of a semester can be closely related, or a variety of unrelated themes can be presented that are of interest to students.

Although theme-based teaching can be used by itself, it works well when used in addition to a textbook (Brinton et al. 2003). A textbook helps provide structure and fills in language gaps the theme-based lessons miss. Theme-based materials can be created to supplement a specific textbook, or materials may not be closely related to the textbook and give a change of pace from the regular lessons.

Why theme-based instruction?
It takes motivation to keep at a difficult task such as learning a new language (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). Students are often more motivated to learn when the language gives information and ideas that are interesting and valuable to them (Izumi, Ikeda, &
Watanabe, 2011). In theme-based instruction, students focus on understanding content about various topics rather than the language itself. Interesting content gives students something to think about besides grammar rules and makes language learning more appealing (Pinner, 2013). Theme-based instruction is not only motivating for students, but it is enjoyable for teachers as well.

Choosing themes

There are an endless amount of topics to choose from for theme-based language instruction. Texts from four example themes are given in the appendices. These example themes are Helen Keller, the mountain K2, pioneers in Major League Baseball, and the beginning of apple production in Aomori prefecture, Japan.

Each of these themes connects in at least one small way to Japan. Connecting the theme to the existing knowledge and experience of the students helps make the topic more accessible (Izumi et al., 2011). An American football related theme, however, might not be the best choice for a topic, since there is little interest and no real connection to the sport in Japan.

As for the first example theme in this paper, Helen Keller (Appendix 1), many students in Japan are already familiar with her story. This topic especially connected to Hokuriku Gakuin University students because they learned that Helen Keller visited the city in which they reside, Kanazawa, and that she spoke in the former auditorium of Hokuriku Gakuin High School, the high school of Hokuriku Gakuin. In the K2 theme (Appendix 2), a Japanese expedition is mentioned as the second team to reach the summit of K2, as is Ichiro Yoshizawa, who led the expedition and translated books about mountaineering from English to Japanese. The baseball theme (Appendix 3) tells about two players, Jackie Robinson and Masanori Murakami. Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player to play in the Major Leagues. Masanori Murakami was the first Japanese baseball player to play in the Major Leagues, and has been called “the Jackie Robinson of Japanese Baseball.” Finally, in the Aomori apple theme (Appendix 4), students learn the story of how apples became popular in Japan.

Not every theme will interest every student. For example, even though baseball is a popular sport in Japan, some students may not be interested in baseball. However, in each theme students can be encouraged to find aspects that will be of interest to them (Pinner, 2012). The story of Murakami, for example, is not just about baseball. In the Murakami story, we hear about someone who moved to the United States without knowing English. We hear about how he undertook the challenge of learning English. We also see Murakami making friends and enjoying being around his new teammates despite the first language difference.

Creating theme-based materials

Theme-based materials will need to be created by the teacher. Going through the process of creating materials will make the teacher become more invested in the lesson, and this will reflect in the classroom and have a positive effect on students. Researching topics is necessary to gain accurate information, and the teacher will be motivated to share interesting facts learned about the topic. As the saying goes, teaching is learning.

The primary materials for the theme-based lessons for the practical English class were one page handouts created for each theme. Each handout contains text about the theme, one or two copyright free photos, questions about the text, and a list of vocabulary words with translations. The Helen Keller handout, for example, in addition to the story about Helen Keller, contains a photo of the child Helen sitting with her teacher, Ann Sullivan, and another photo of Helen Keller visiting Japan later in life. At the bottom of the handout are five basic questions about the text, along with a short list of vocabulary words from the text translated to Japanese.

Handouts should not only contain accurate and interesting information, but also be appealing to the eye. Bold or large print headings are helpful. White-space on handouts, whether between paragraphs, on
the top or bottom of the page or in extra wide margins, allows the students a place to take notes and make handouts their own (Izumi et al., 2011).

Materials for theme-based instruction include visuals to introduce a topic. Before giving students handouts, the theme of Helen Keller can be introduced by showing a picture of the child Helen and her teacher Miss Sullivan, followed by basic questions to students such as, “Who are they?”, “How old do you think she is?”, “What is a good title for this picture?” and so on. Brainstorming existing knowledge of the students, plus using illustrations or real objects, helps engage the class before diving into a topic (Coyle et al. 2010). Pre-listening activities also set the stage for the theme and prepare students for what they are about to hear and read (Lightbown, 2014).

Authentic materials also enhance a theme-based lesson. Authentic materials are texts, videos, photos, or other materials not especially designed for the classroom (Richards, 2001). Authentic texts can be novels, newspaper articles, recipes, advertisements, travel brochures, or anything else written in the target language for a target language audience (Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007).

Videos were one type of authentic material used in the practical English class. A video found online entitled “Climb K2 in 3D!” (Rawlinson, 2013) went well with the text of the K2 handout. The video, just under eight minutes long, described the process from start to finish of getting to the top of K2. The video was narrated with text but had no spoken words, so the text was read and explained to the students as the video progressed. The video repeated words and phrases that students had heard previously from the text on the K2 handout, such as “expedition” and “K2 is the second highest mountain.” Other ideas and facts about K2 were repeated as well, such as that because of the steepness of the mountain and stormy weather, K2 is considered to be more challenging to climb than Mount Everest. The video also introduced words that were not on the K2 handout, such as “glacier,” “summit,” and “oxygen.” Too many new words or too much complex language in a video is not productive, so the teacher should choose videos that are at a suitable level (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012).

Another authentic material that was used in the practical English class was an excerpt from Helen Keller’s autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (Keller, 1905). The passage tells of a breaking point in the life of Helen Keller. It describes an episode where Anne Sullivan is struggling to communicate with the child Helen. Finally, Miss Sullivan is able to get a message through to her student as Helen realizes that the letters w-a-t-e-r Miss Sullivan just spelled in her hand is the cool something she feels flowing out of a well. Authentic materials help enliven a theme.

### The four strands of language learning

Nation (2007) identified four strands of language learning that should run through any language course. Attention given to each of the four strands helps ensure theme-based materials are being used effectively. The four strands are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. All activities in a language classroom fit into one of these four strands. Nation says that approximately equal amounts of time should be given to each strand.

As for the necessity to spend time on each strand, Nation points to the time-on-task principle, which says that the more time we spend doing something, the better we become at it. Nation says that to learn to read, we must read. To learn to write, we must write. Also, time must be spent on each of the strands. Within the strands, attention must be given to each of the four language skills, which are listening, speaking, reading,
and writing.

The first strand, meaning-focused input, has to do with receiving language through listening and reading. “Meaning-focused” refers to the focus and interest of students being on understanding, learning from, and enjoying what is being listened to or read. Reading stories, watching film, or listening to a conversation all fall into this strand. Students should understand 95 to 98 percent of what they hear or read for meaning-focused input to occur. Only five words, but preferably only one or two per hundred, should be new. Background knowledge and context clues should help the students guess at the meanings of new words.

The second strand, meaning-focused output, has to do with producing language through speaking and writing. This can take place by giving a presentation, writing a letter, keeping a journal, or telling a story. Again, as with meaning-focused input, the main goal is to convey meaning to others. In this strand students communicate about things they are familiar with and for the most part use language they are familiar with.

The third strand is language-focused learning. Here we have direct language instruction, such as focus on vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation. This can include activities such as substitution drills, memorizing dialogues, using vocabulary cards, pronunciation practice, or receiving feedback on writing. Over the entire course, Nation says that language-focused instruction should not take up more than a quarter of the time.

Finally, the fourth strand of language learning is fluency development. This strand involves not only speaking, but also listening, reading and writing. This strand is also meaning-focused, where messages are received and conveyed. Speed practice would be an activity in this strand. This is not the strand where new items are learned, but rather where students get good at using what they already know.

All four strands can occur within one theme. Three of the four strands are meaning-focused. Language-focused instruction could lead to meaning-focused input or output, which could lead to fluency practice, all in the same theme. What follows is an application of each of the four strands to theme-based materials.

**Strand 1: Theme-based meaningful input**

Meaningful input comes from listening and reading. The attention of the students should be on understanding what is being listened to or read (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012). As Nation (2007) says, in order for meaningful input to occur, new language items should be limited so that students are able to grasp the meaning of what they hear or read. Reading texts that are too difficult is frustrating and counterproductive, but understanding simplified texts in a new language is motivating (Lightbown, 2014).

The texts on the handouts for each theme are aimed at providing meaningful input. In the Helen Keller text, for example, there are approximately 180 words. If we remember Nation’s (2007) advice to keep it at least 95 percent understandable, this allows for a maximum of nine new words. These new words include “blind,” “deaf,” and “auditorium.” Words such as these can be in some way highlighted in the text, or not, but in any case a translation of the vocabulary words should be given somewhere on the handout.

A vocabulary word list with L1 translations on handouts helps with smooth reading. Other than L1 translations, there are a number of ways that the meanings of unknown words can be conveyed, such as a definition in the second language, a demonstration, a picture, an actual object, or clues from the context in the second language. Nation (2003) points out that all these ways can accurately convey the meaning of a word. However, studies have consistently shown that of all methods, the most effective one is simply providing a L1 translation. L1 translations are clear, brief, and familiar, thus they are effective. Nation also mentions that the use of L1 translations on word cards has been shown to speed up the rate of vocabulary learning.

Other than new vocabulary words, new names and places can be introduced and written on the board prior to the reading. In the Helen Keller text, the name Takeo Iwahashi appears. Tuscumbia, Alabama is mentioned. Radcliffe College and Nippon Lighthouse
are also mentioned. Familiar items are included in the text as well that connect the unknown to the known, such as Kanazawa and Hokuriku Gakuin High School.

During the reading, keywords or important points that were written on the board can be underlined (Izumi, et al. 2011). It also helps to give students illustrations related to the story to look at while listening. Another option is to create a task for students to do while listening, such as a fill-in-the blank activity.

The teacher needs to gauge how difficult the text should be and adjust to the level of the class. At times it may be a difficult to know what words to use when creating materials. Nation and Chung (2009) suggest Michael West’s *A General Service List of English Words* (1953) as a helper, which lists the most commonly used English words and places them in order of frequency of use. There is also an updated list available that was published in 2013, *The New General Service List*, which contains 2,800 words (Browne, 2014). High frequency words should be used in the texts (Izumi et al. 2011).

Besides help with vocabulary and new names and places, shorter sentences make the text more understandable. Long, complex sentences are broken up. For example, in the Helen Keller text, “Iwahashi, who was also blind, was the director of Nippon Lighthouse, an organization that helps blind people” becomes “Iwahashi was also blind. He was the director of Nippon Lighthouse. Nippon Lighthouse is an organization that helps blind people.” Also, similar basic sentence patterns can be used throughout a text, such as “Hellen Keller visited Kanazawa”, “Helen Kellen visited Japan”, and “Helen Keller visited Hokuriku Gakuin High School.”

**Strand 2: Theme-based meaningful output**

Nation (2007) says that each strand should take up roughly an equal amount of time. However, in the university classroom, especially where students are learning a very different language from their native language, input will usually exceed output. Nevertheless, opportunities to produce the language through speaking and writing are a necessity (Muranoi, 2007). There is not one simple solution to language learning, all four strands must be present (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012).

A teacher can begin the class with simple routines such as having students state one fact or sentence about the theme from the previous lesson. Although classroom routines should occasionally be broken to challenge students, having predictable patterns of activities will make lessons easy to follow, and students can prepare something to say ahead of time (Izumi et al., 2011).

Answering questions about the themes is another means of producing meaning-focused output. For example, after students listen to the Helen Keller story (and before receiving a copy of the handout containing the text), the teacher asks questions from the handout such as, “Where was Helen Keller born?” and “Who was Helen Keller’s teacher?”

Students may answer however they are able, and instruction on how to answer the questions in correct English can be given soon after. Grammatical mistakes are to be expected. The initial goal is that students understand what they hear, understand the questions, and try to produce meaningful output by answering the questions. However, language instruction often goes the opposite direction as the above pattern, that is, by teaching how to answer first and then practicing and producing (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015).

Some questions will elicit one word answers. For example, for the question “Where is Helen Keller from?” short answers might be given such as “Alabama.” For the question “Which mountain is higher, Mount Everest or K2?” The answer might simply be “Mount Everest.” That is fine, and instructions on how to make sentences out of those answers can be given later and practiced again.

Students can also retell the stories in pairs. Even just forming five to seven basic sentences summarizing a theme will be a good opportunity to produce meaningful output. For example, the Aomori apple text could be summed up by using common and useful sentence structures such as “John Ing was a teacher. He was from Indiana. He lived in Hirosaki, Aomori."
He gave apples to Hirosaki Church members. Now, there are many apple trees in Aomori.”

Role plays are also effective. One student interviews another who imagines they are an expert on Helen Keller. One student interviews another student who imagines they are a mountain climber who just climbed K2. A student imagines they are a baseball player going to the United States.

Giving presentations is another way of producing output. After a range of themes has been presented to students over several classes, students begin preparing their own presentation on a theme of choice. The theme is based on a hobby or special interest, or something the student would like to research and learn more about. A handout with text describing the topic in 150 to 200 words is made by the student and distributed to each class member. The student presenting is given the opportunity to act in the role of the teacher and ask a series of questions about the theme. Each student will have the opportunity to show their expertise on a topic. This can also be done in pairs or groups, but doing the project individually will allow for more creativity. Here again, teaching is learning.

**Strand 3 : Language-focused learning**

Language-focused learning is often called form-focused instruction. This strand involves focus on language features such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Spaced, repeated attention should be given to language features. It has been shown time and again that deliberate learning of vocabulary is effective, and this includes multiword units as well (Nation, 2007).

Language-focused instruction can be given when teaching how to answer questions from handouts in correct English. Language-focused instruction can also take place by drilling and practicing sentence structures from the handouts with similar sentences. “Where is Helen Keller from?” leads to “Where are you from?” “I’m from Kanazawa” and “Where is he from?” The sentences should be useful and simple and not based on language the students do not know yet (Nation, 2007).

If the teacher wants to emphasize a particular sentence structure, this can be done by repeated use of it in a text. It can also be emphasized on the handout by using bold print, underlining, italicizing, or changing the font style or size. Orally, this can be done by emphasizing certain phrases, repetition, or changing the speed of delivery or intonation (Izumi et al. 2011).

Giving regular quizzes is another way to study vocabulary and grammar. While the content is educational also, the goal of the class is to learn English, so quizzes focus on correct language rather than facts about the theme. For the question “How tall is the mountain K2?” the answers would not be a) 7611 meters or b) 8611 meters. Rather, the answers would be a) K2 is tall and dangerous or b) K2 is 8611 meters tall. Vocabulary words are reviewed and quizzed in sentences rather than individual bits. Vocabulary words from the K2 theme such as “steep” are learned in sentences such as “The mountain is steep.”

**Strand 4 : Theme-based fluency development**

The fluency development strand not only involves speaking, but also listening, reading, and writing. This strand involves practicing language that is already familiar. As Lightbown (2014) says, we improve at what we practice, and the final goal of language is automaticity. Nation (2007) says this strand is often overlooked, perhaps because there are no new language items being introduced, and so it appears as though no learning is taking place.

Repetition is crucial in this strand. Nation points to Palmer (1925), whose most valuable piece of advice to those wanting to learn conversational English was, “Memorize perfectly the largest number of common and useful word-groups.” Palmer emphasized the importance of repetition and memorization. He also advised to focus on the most useful phrases of a language rather than obscure ones. Palmer was saddened when he saw students laboring over incorrect and worthless English sentences.

Following Palmer’s advice, basic sentence patterns...
from the texts are continually reviewed and practiced until they are second nature, such as sentences launched from the Helen Keller text like “Where are you from? I am from Kanazawa”, “I was born in 1998”, “I graduated from Hokuriku Gakuin High School.” Sentences from the Aomori apples theme, such as “Aomori prefecture has thousands of apple trees”, lead to “Ishikawa prefecture has many art museums” or “Kanazawa has a lot of museums.” Statements such as these can be practiced at the start of each class.

Repetition also involves revisiting themes throughout the semester. This can be done by reviewing different questions from previous themes week to week. This is another activity that can take place at the beginning of class, and over time it will help build student confidence.

Conclusion

English teachers should consider including theme-based instruction in the university classroom. It is motivating for students and enjoyable for teachers. Through theme-based instruction, English is learned while learning about something else. In the themes discussed in this paper, we have encountered people such as Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, Ichiro Yoshizawa, Jackie Robinson, Masanori Murakami, and John Ing. A variety of places have been spoken of, such as Alabama, Indiana, Kanazawa, and Hirosaki. We learned about Nippon Lighthouse, Hirosaki Church, K2 expedition teams and baseball teams. The principle of the four strands of language learning was applied, giving direction for how to teach with theme-based materials. This combination of theme-based materials and the four strands makes for interesting and effective English lessons.

Appendix 1 : Helen Keller in Kanazawa (theme 1)

Helen Keller in Kanazawa

Many people know the story of Helen Keller. Helen was born on June 27, 1880. She was from Tuscumbia, Alabama. When Helen was 19 months old, she became sick, and then she became blind and deaf.

In 1887, Anne Sullivan became Helen’s teacher. Miss Sullivan wrote words with her finger in Helen’s hand. Helen learned to communicate more and more. Later, Helen graduated from Radcliffe College and became an author and speaker.

In 1936, a man named Takeo Iwahashi invited Helen Keller to Japan. Iwahashi was also blind. He was the director of Nippon Lighthouse. Nippon Lighthouse is an organization that helps blind people.

Anne Sullivan wanted Helen to go to Japan. Anne became sick and died in 1936. After she died, Helen visited Japan.

Helen Keller visited Japan three times during her life. She visited Japan in 1937, 1948, and 1955.

While in Japan, Helen Keller visited Kanazawa. She visited Kanazawa on June 9 and 10, 1937 and September 22, 1948. (She may have visited in 1955 also.)

In Kanazawa, Helen visited Hokuriku Gakuin High School. She spoke in the former auditorium of the school.
Appendix 2 : K2, the second tallest mountain (theme 2)

Fig.3  K2 expedition in 1954

K2, the Second Tallest Mountain

K2 is a mountain on the border between China and Pakistan. It is the second tallest mountain in the world. K2 is 8,611 meters tall.

Mount Everest is 237 meters taller than K2. However, K2 is more difficult to climb. K2 is a dangerous mountain. Storms suddenly come. There are often avalanches. Also, K2 is steep and icy. Over 4,000 different people have climbed Mount Everest. Less than 400 people have climbed K2.

In 1954, climbers from an Italian expedition reached the top of K2. They were the first team to reach the top of the mountain.

In 1977, climbers from a Japanese expedition reached the top of K2. They were the second team to reach the top of the mountain.

Both the Italian and Japanese teams had members from Pakistan also.

The Japanese expedition was led by Ichiro Yoshizawa (1903-1998). Yoshizawa wrote many books about mountain climbing. He also translated books about mountain climbing from English to Japanese.

Appendix 3 : Pioneers in Major League Baseball (theme 3, part 1)

Fig.4  Jackie Robinson baseball card, 1949

Jackie Robinson

In 1947, Jackie Robinson (1919-1972) became the first black baseball player to play in the Major Leagues.

In those days, there was a separate group of baseball teams for black players. However, a man named Branch Rickey wanted Jackie Robinson to play for his team. Branch Rickey was the president of a Major League Baseball team. The name of the team was the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Some people did not want black players to be on the same baseball teams as white players. Rickey knew that it would be difficult for Robinson to play for the Dodgers. Robinson also knew it would be a difficult. When Rickey met Robinson, he opened his Bible and read these words to him: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5 : 39).

Robinson played ten years for the Dodgers. Sometimes people watching the games called him names. Occasionally pitchers tried to hit Robinson with the ball. Sometimes umpires were unfair.

Robinson prayed for help. Robinson did not fight back, and he had a great baseball career. This helped open the door for others to play Major League Baseball.

Appendix 4 : Pioneers in Major League Baseball (theme 3, part 2)

Fig.5  Murakami in 2014

Masanori “Mashi” Murakami

Masanori Murakami was the first Japanese baseball player to play in the Major Leagues. Murakami played for the San Francisco Giants in 1964 and 1965.
Murakami was a pitcher. Before coming to the United States, he played one year for the Nankai Hawks.

Murakami could speak very little English when he arrived in the United States. When Murakami looked at his contract, he could not understand it because it was in English. He signed it anyway.

Murakami carried two dictionaries with him: an English dictionary and a Japanese dictionary. He used the dictionaries to talk to teammates. Murakami did not use an interpreter to talk to teammates. Murakami said this helped him learn English fast.

Murakami was a good pitcher. He enjoyed playing for the Giants. His teammates called him “Mashi.” He made friends with players such as Willie Mays. Willie Mays was a star for the Giants.

After returning to Japan, Murakami played for the Hawks again. He also played one year for the Hanshin Tigers and seven years for the Nippon-Ham Fighters. The next Japanese baseball player to play in the Major Leagues was Hideo Nomo, in 1995.

Appendix 5: Aomori apples (theme 4)

Aomori Apples

Johnny Appleseed was a man who planted apple trees around the United States. His real name was John Chapman (1774-1845). There is also a “Johnny Appleseed of Japan.” His name was John Ing (1840-1920). John Ing was from the state of Indiana. He brought apples to Aomori prefecture.

John Ing was a Christian missionary and English teacher in Hirosaki, Aomori from 1870 to 1878. He taught at Toogijuku High School. He also helped start Hirosaki Church. At a Christmas service at the church, John Ing gave presents to the young church members. The Christmas presents were apples from Indiana. At that time, apples were rarely eaten in Japan. However, the apples that John Ing brought were large and delicious.

The church members liked the apples. They asked John Ing to bring small apple trees to Japan. Later, they started an apple growing business.

Today, Aomori prefecture has thousands of apple trees. Over half of all apples from Japan are from Aomori. Many delicious products are made from the apples, such as apple juice.

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