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Using Thematic Unit Planning in a Pre-service Bilingual Teacher Education Course

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Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) requires that all students, including English language learners (ELLs), reach high academic standards by demonstrating proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by 2014. As a result, school districts must show that ELLs, among other sub groups, make continuous progress in the general education curriculum, or risk serious consequences (Abedi & Dietel, 2004).

The "English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act" contained in Section 3101 of NCLB (2001) defines an English language learner as an individual between the ages of 3-21, who is enrolled (or about to enroll) in a U.S. elementary or secondary school and meets two criteria. The first criterion is that the student was not born in the United States or speaks a native language other than English. The second condition is that the student may be unable to score at the proficient level on state assessments of academic achievement; learn successfully in classrooms in which English is the language of instruction; and participate fully in society because of

difficulties in speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language.

According to a recent report by the Public Education Network and National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (2009), there are approximately 5.5 million students in U.S. public schools who speak more than 400 languages other than English as first languages. This figure constitutes 12 percent of public school students. Eighty percent of all ELLs speak Spanish as their first language (NCLB Action Briefs, 2009). As a result of the growing number of ELLs in today's classrooms, current and future educators are challenged to ensure that these students, including newcomers such as immigrants, refugees, and political asylees, develop English proficiency based on state expectations in order to meet the same content and achievement standards as their English-speaking counterparts.

Language minority students attending U.S. public schools encounter certain school-related challenges on a regular basis. Specifically, they face the urgent task of learning English and content area concepts at the same time. They also have critical needs along with their culturally diverse peers. The more fundamental needs include the invitation to participate, acknowledgement and acceptance by teachers and other students, and having their experiences, cultures, languages, and traditions validated as part of a culturally relevant curriculum. ELLs also desire to experience success in school (Cowart & Cowart, 2008).

Bilingual and ESL education

English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education are two programs for accommodating ELLs in which teachers may

obtain certification. An ESL program may serve as both a stand-alone program or as a necessary component of a bilingual education curriculum. While methodologies differ broadly, ESL teachers tend to focus instruction on the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English by creating encouraging and welcoming environments that reduce the affective filter and by presenting lessons with comprehensible input. The students' first language is frequently used for explanation and to augment comprehension.

A program of bilingual education utilizes both the heritage language and target or second language as vehicles for instruction in all or part of the curriculum. Exploring the history and culture associated with a student's first language as well as the history and culture of the target language is considered an essential part of bilingual education. A bilingual education program is generally organized around three basic goals:

- 1) The ongoing development of the student's first or native language (L1);
- 2) Acquisition of the second or target language (L2), which is English for language minority students in the United States; and
- 3) Education in content area classes employing both L1 and L2 (Dam & Cowart, 2008).

Thus, instruction is provided in two languages. The objective of a bilingual program is to acquire new learning through the native language and gradually add the second language. The bilingual approach respects the importance of the native culture and language in American society (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

To improve educational outcomes for all students, including ELLs, NCLB also requires that educators use scientifically based methods of teaching (NCLB, 2001). This means that teachers,

regardless of their certification focus, must use curricular and instructional methods known to improve their students' academic success. As a result of this mandate, it is imperative that future teachers successfully complete teacher preparation programs that embrace approaches that are known to positively impact the learning and achievement of academically diverse learners. Lenz and Deshler (2004) provide the following definition of the academic diversity that characterizes today's classrooms:

A class with significant academic diversity is characterized by students achieving in the average, above-average, and below-average range of academic performance as measured by teacher, school, school district, or state academic standards. This diversity in performance may be attributed to the interaction between individual differences among teachers and students in, but not limited to, learning needs, emotional needs, culture, gender, life experiences, life situations, age, sexual orientation, physical abilities, cognitive abilities, behavior, skills, strategies, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics, and values (p. 2).

Strategic Instruction Model

One model of instruction that has proven to be effective for academically diverse learners is the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM). SIM was researched and developed at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. Lenz & Deshler (2004) describe two components of SIM. One component is the Learning Strategies Curriculum. Learning strategies are student-focused and teach students how to learn and perform related to the academic, social, motivational, and executive demands of school. Thus, students who struggle in any of these areas, including ELLs, may

be taught how to read, write, participate appropriately in social situations, or how to study and prepare for tests (Graving-Reyes & Nottingham, 2005).

The second component of SIM includes Content Enhancement Routines. These routines are teacher-centered and provide a way of teaching academically diverse groups of students based on four conditions:

- (1) both group and individual needs are valued and met;
- (2) the integrity of the content is maintained;
- (3) critical features of the content are selected and presented in a way that promotes learning for all students; and,
- (4) instruction is carried out in a partnership with the students.

Both learning strategy and content enhancement instruction have been incorporated into a school-wide framework for improving content literacy. This framework is known as the Content Literacy Continuum (CLC). A major goal of teachers in the CLC is to ensure mastery of critical core content for all students regardless of literacy levels (Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005). The CLC has been shown to be an effective approach for raising the test scores of students who struggle to learn, including ELLs (Tollefson & Graving-Reyes, 2007). One of the Content Enhancement Routines that is frequently used by teachers in the CLC is *The Unit Organizer Routine*.

The Unit Organizer Routine was developed to help teachers respond to the needs of diverse groups of learners in inclusive classrooms (Lenz, 1995). Specifically, the routine focuses on how teachers can frame a unit for their students by using a consistent set of instructional methods. A unit is considered to be a "chunk" of content that a teacher selects to organize into lessons and that ends

in some type of closure activity. Through the planning process, teachers build a unit based on big ideas and show how units, critical information, and concepts are related.

Early research on *The Unit Organizer Routine* (Lenz, Shumaker, Deshler, Boudah, Vance, Kissam, Bulgren, & Roth, 1993) revealed that teacher planning was enhanced and the performance of diverse learners, including low-achieving students, students with learning disabilities, and average-achieving students, substantially improved their understanding and retention of information. The initial findings were significant since students' ability to retain and express critical information is important to achieving success in the general education curriculum.

The purpose of this article is to describe an interdisciplinary thematic unit assignment that was required in a course for future teachers of bilingual students. To prepare their assignment, teachers were required to use *The Unit Organizer Routine* as a tool to help them plan and present their units. The first part of the article describes how thematic unit planning addresses the learning characteristics of bilingual students. Then, an overview of the course and directions for the thematic unit assignment is presented. Next, each section of *The Unit Organizer Routine* is explained through an example of student work. Following the student example are perceptions of what the students believed they had learned as a result of using *The Unit Organizer Routine*. Finally, suggestions for teachers and administrators on how to plan effective thematic units for ELLs are offered.

Thematic unit planning for English language learners

Whether in an ESL or bilingual classroom, careful, detailed,

specific planning is essential to the development of language and content knowledge for ELLs. Horwitz (2008) notes that pre-service teachers often hold false impressions about what lesson planning entails. Thus, initial attempts at lesson and unit planning for ELLs tend to generate lessons that are not carefully planned and may not tap into student interests or teacher abilities. Knowledge of the fine points of a lesson or unit and how to organize the learning that is to take place grows with experience and, therefore, may be lacking for the pre-service or novice teacher. To further complicate the university students' comprehension of what is required for effective planning and teaching, the substantial emphasis on high-stakes testing has frequently served to eliminate some instructional models and strategies because of the perceived amount of time necessary for implementation. The stress placed upon teachers regarding the importance of improved student performance on high-stakes tests may further deprive the teacher of any significant opportunity to introduce appropriate instructional methodology into the curriculum. This results in student teachers missing the opportunity to observe and practice thematic teaching of ELLs in action. However, the intense nature of high-stakes testing does not preclude the needs of ELLs to be taught in an interesting, organized, and connected fashion that acknowledges their multiple ways of learning. Tools that assist teachers in planning systematically at both the daily lesson plan and the unit levels also serve to enhance the educational attainment of ELLs (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006).

One tool that has proven to be effective in the teaching of ELLs is the thematic unit, defined as an instructional unit organized around a central theme that integrates language learning with the development of content area knowledge (Levine &

McCloskey, 2009). Teachers have found thematic units to be quite successful in various levels of instruction to teach language objectives through investigation of content from a variety of subject areas (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006). Diaz-Rico (2008) notes that thematic instruction provides an appropriate vehicle for practicing language skills as students investigate and learn concepts from multiple areas of the curriculum.

Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, & Ariza (2007) note that several factors point to a strong justification for utilizing thematic units with ELLs, including the following:

- Thematic instruction presents a context for learning because of a connection to a central theme.
- Themes guide students to focus on significant and notable information. This focus serves as a motivation to acquire content knowledge and language proficiency simultaneously.
- Themes make possible the connecting of ideas and information, making storage and retrieval less problematic.
- Themes allow students to experience the same content through a variety of experiences and perspectives.
- The interplay of linguistic structures and vocabulary with content area concepts supports the development of English language proficiency and the gaining of essential knowledge as well.

In describing effective practice for linguistically and culturally diverse students, Garcia (1994) states that as the degree of diversity found among students in a class increases, the curriculum should also expand in its integration of multiple subject areas and that numerous content area and language learning objectives should be structured around central themes. As observed by Ovando, Combs, and Collier (2006), thematic units tend to

emphasize experiential, discovery learning that leads students to make applications across the curriculum. Levine and McCloskey (2009) suggest that thematic teaching enables students to recognize connecting links that are crosscurricular and to make related associations in the brain.

Overview of course and assignment

Course description and objectives

Students who elect to obtain bilingual teacher certification at a mid-sized state university in a large southwestern state are required to take a course in bilingual materials and instructional applications. The course investigates the effective teaching of linguistically diverse students with an emphasis on curriculum design, program implementation and appropriate materials. Several objectives related to planning and teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students frame the course. Upon completion of the course students will be able to:

- prepare lessons and materials in L1 and L2,
- design a thematic unit in L1 and L2,
- select appropriate instructional strategies for use in L1 and L2,
- provide an appropriate bilingual multicultural learning environment,
- explain current approaches for teaching English language learners,
- describe sources of linguistically diverse students and their unique experiences,

- select appropriate approaches to deliver content area instruction which concurrently supports second language acquisition,
- demonstrate adequate content area related fluency and literacy in L1 and L2,
- demonstrate knowledge of content area curricula,
- create authentic learning activities and assessments, and
- demonstrate knowledge of appropriate culturally relevant materials for the classroom.

Student characteristics

Students enrolled in the course are pre-service teachers who are preparing to be bilingual teachers with an EC-6 or 4-8 grade certification. The course, called Bilingual Education: Instructional Applications and Materials, is a requirement for bilingual certification. Because each of the students will probably teach in a bilingual setting, fluency and literacy in English and Spanish must be demonstrated.

While most of the pre-service teachers are Latino (a), the rest may be from a variety of other ethnic groups. The common thread of the class members is that they are bilingual, able to converse, read, and write in English and Spanish. Those who claim Latino heritage generally come from Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Cuba, and the United States.

Levels of first language or L1 proficiency also diverge. Several students are sequential bilinguals, meaning that they learned Spanish as a first language and English as a second language (L2) at a later date. Others are simultaneous bilinguals, having learned both English and Spanish concurrently (Saville-

Troike, 2006). In each situation the students ceased the development of academic Spanish at the point in their education when instruction was delivered in English only. Thus, the students tend to have varying degrees of confidence in their ability to explain content area information in Spanish. Preparing a bilingual interdisciplinary thematic unit gives students the opportunity to not only learn about and develop a thematic unit, but also explore academic Spanish for a number of content areas. The thematic unit assignment is a good culminating activity, allowing students to demonstrate their understanding and, hopefully, mastery of the course objectives.

Thematic unit assignment

The pre-service teachers are first introduced to a systematic format for lesson planning, using a very detailed lesson plan that includes the learner objective, a focus strategy, instructional input, guided practice, questions essential to checking for understanding, transfer strategy, closure, and independent or group work. Next they learn about thematic units in general and *The Unit Organizer* as a useful instrument for planning and instruction. To make the assignment less overwhelming for the novice teacher education students, the directions for the thematic unit have been simplified and require that the unit be geared for fourth grade and developed around a unique aspect or theme, of weather, Texas history, an author or genre study, types of writing, or astronomy. Such controlled choice is designed to eliminate some of the intimidating nature of selecting a theme. Finally, the pre-service teachers are allowed to work in pairs so that they may assist one another with

brainstorming, selecting materials and activities, and in writing lesson plans.

Additional instructions, as outlined in Figure 1, call for the students to write an introductory lesson plan, a social studies lesson plan, and a science lesson plan in Spanish. The math, ESL, and music or art lesson plans are to be written in English.

While six lesson plans are rarely sufficient for creating a strong thematic unit, students benefit from developing a portion of a unit with very specific guidelines. The instructions also call for a list of vocabulary words in English and Spanish, an instructional bulletin board, a list of five multicultural read-alouds that pertain to the theme, and a list of five songs and/or poems that support unit objectives. *The Unit Organizer Routine* combined with the elements of a strong thematic unit assists the pre-service teachers in understanding how to systematically plan for effectively teaching a large block of information in a meaningful way.

Components of The Unit Organizer Routine

The Unit Organizer device

A visual device, called *The Unit Organizer* serves as the “centerpiece” of *The Unit Organizer Routine* (Lenz, 1994). This device helps teachers create the content of the unit and related information. The Unit Organizer consists of two pages. Page 1 depicts the overall organization for the unit information, and any connecting relationships, questions, and tasks associated with what students are expected to learn from the unit. The second page provides an expanded unit map as an ongoing structure for effective note-taking. This second page also serves to inform the

Figure 1. Thematic Unit Assignment Directions**Thematic Unit Assignment**

Students will work in pairs to develop an interdisciplinary thematic unit based on a unique aspect of one of the following broad themes: weather, Texas history, an author or genre study, types of writing, or astronomy. The unit should be appropriate for a fourth grade class of English language learners who are at the intermediate level of English language proficiency. Each pair of students will utilize the lesson plan format and unit organizer that will be taught in class. The following items should be included in the unit:

- **Title page**
- **Overview of unit and unit objectives**
- **The unit organizer and expanded unit map**
- **An introductory lesson plan in Spanish**
- **One math lesson plan in English**
- **One social studies lesson plan in Spanish**
- **One science lesson plan in Spanish**
- **One ESL lesson plan in English**
- **One music or art lesson plan in English**
- **A list of key vocabulary words in English and Spanish**
- **A list of five (5) multicultural read-alouds (in Spanish and/or English) that will support the unit theme**
- **An instructional bulletin board idea**
- **A list of five (5) songs and/or poems to support the unit objectives**

Please note that every lesson must support the unit theme.

teacher regarding the content of daily lessons. The completed examples in Figures 2 and 3 (opposite page and the next) show how two students in the bilingual class co-planned a unit on the solar system. It is important to note that The Unit Organizer was originally developed to involve K-12 students in the planning process as early as they are able. However, this feature may be modified according to the language and L2 literacy needs of English language learners.

Unit Organizer sections

1. *Current Unit.* In this section, students find the title of the new unit. In Figure 2, the name of the current unit is "The Solar System."

2. *Last Unit/Experience.* The information in this space includes the name of the last unit that was covered. In Figure 2, the last unit was "Galaxies."

3. *Next Unit/Experience.* In this section, students observe the name of the unit or experience that will follow the current unit. In Figure 2, the name of the next unit is "Earth."

4. *The Bigger Picture.* This section contains the name of the larger category that holds several units together. Specifically, it helps students understand how multiple units are related. In Figure 2, for example, the larger category into which the last, current, and next units fit is "The Universe."

5. *Unit Map.* The map is the heart of the Unit Organizer and includes two sources of information as follows:

- *Unit Paraphrase.* The unit paraphrase is written at the top of the map and is intended to capture the central point or meaning of the current unit. Students, with guidance from the teacher, write

The Unit Organizer

① Bigger picture: The Universe

Name: Janet Gonzales & Ana Garcia
Date: April 30, 2008

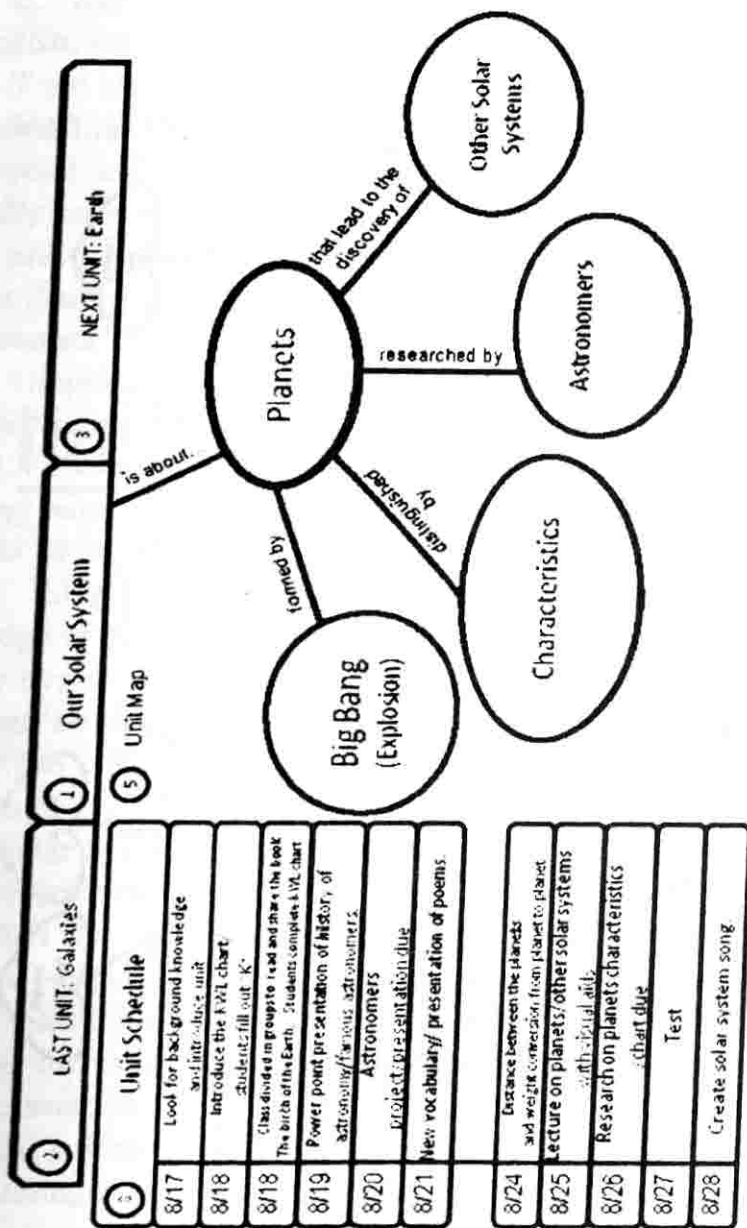


Figure 2. The Unit Map

Name: Janet Gonzales & Ana Garcia
Date: April 30, 2009

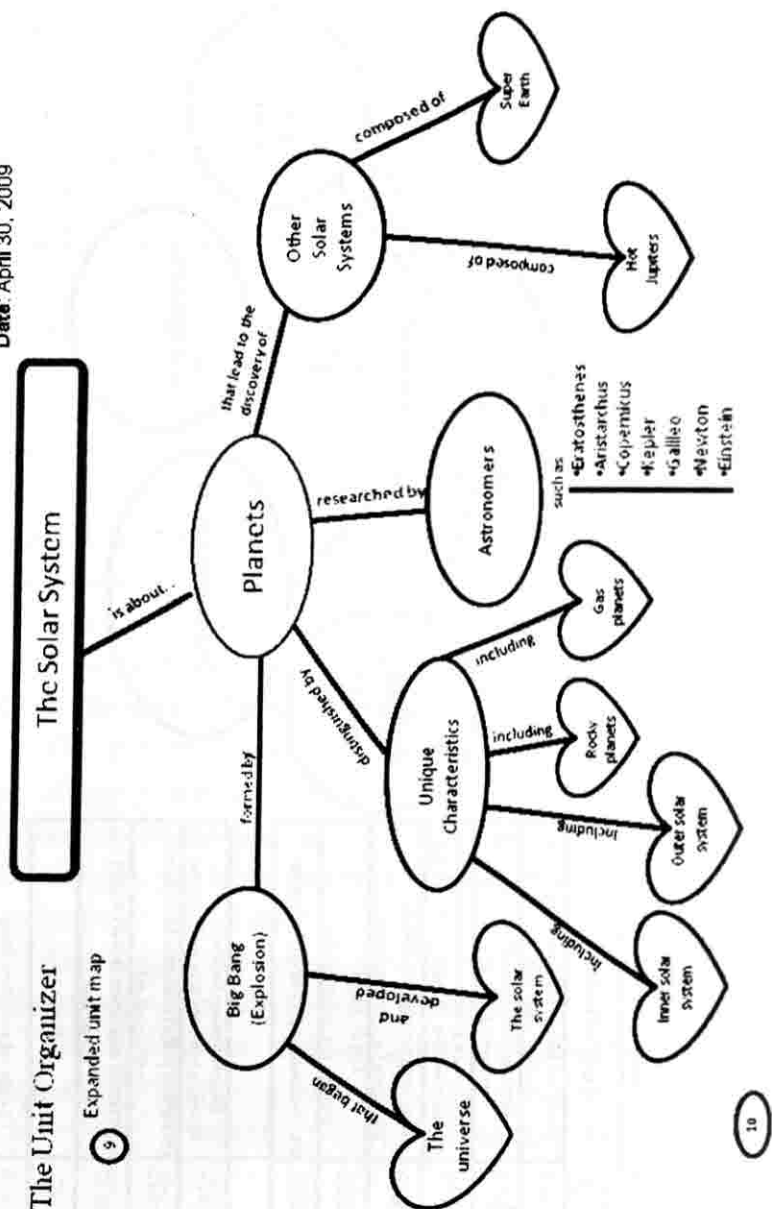


Figure 3. The Expanded Unit Map
(Unit Organizer and Expanded Unit Map completed by Anna Garcia and Janet Gonzales)

their paraphrase in words that are easy for them to understand and relate to. When working with ELLs who possess little proficiency in English, the teacher should start the school year by providing most, if not all, of the information on the Unit Organizer and the Expanded Unit Map. As the year progresses and students develop both social and academic language in English, the teacher may gradually assist students in filling in some of the information, such as the unit paraphrase, with their own words. The sample unit in Figures 2 and 3 shows a simple paraphrase – “The solar system is about planets.”

- **Graphic Organizer.** The graphic organizer is a type of flow chart or “semantic map” that shows the organization of the unit content. If they are proficient enough in English, students can write key words within geometric shapes, such as ovals, to indicate the parts of the unit to be learned. Otherwise, the teacher should provide this information until the students have substantial knowledge of academic language in English and have internalized the *Unit Organizer Routine*. This part of the map should contain no more than seven parts. In Figure 2, the unit map represents four parts of the unit on the Solar System: “Big Bang (Explosion),” “Characteristics,” “Astronomers (History of Astronomy),” and “Other Solar Systems.” These four main parts of the unit become the unit objectives.

Within the unit map, students draw lines between the geometric shapes and the unit paraphrase. Students write the labels in such a way that the words in the unit paraphrase, the line label, and the words in a connected geometric shape then form a complete sentence. The line labels help students remember how parts of the unit are connected or related. The teacher should draw the connecting lines and provide the labels when English language

proficiency is in initial stages of development. Figure 2 shows the line labels that connect each paraphrase and the geometric shapes.

6. *Unit Relationships.* In this section, specific relationships that might be important to look for, as well as the kinds of thinking required to learn the information are recorded. In Figure 2, for example, the teacher and students studying the solar system may learn the cause and effect from the explosion that resulted in planet formation. They may rank order the planets, and they may use categorization to describe the characteristics of the planets.

7. *Unit Self-Test Questions.* This section is used to generate and write questions related to different parts of the unit when it is complete. Later, students can use these questions to study for the unit test. Figure 2 shows questions students should be able to answer at the end of the unit on the Solar System.

8. *Unit Schedule.* The information in this section summarizes the schedule of required tasks, activities, or assignments that the K-12 students will complete during the course of the unit. Figure 2 shows the unit schedule of learning activities for acquiring knowledge about the Solar System.

9. *Expanded Unit Map.* The Expanded Unit Map is presented after the first page of the Unit Organizer has been completed. This second page can be used throughout and at the end of the unit to expand the unit by adding critical subtopics, details, and key vocabulary in note form. For the thematic unit assignment required in the bilingual course, the additional information that is included on the Expanded Unit Map may be organized into specific daily lesson plans, illustrating for the public school students the most essential information that the unit will contain. The ELL with intermediate or advanced academic language proficiency in English may utilize the Expanded Unit Map as a

note-taking device during daily lessons or during review at the end of each lesson. Figure 3 shows the expanded map for the unit on the Solar System. The pre-service teacher candidates who developed the sample unit seized the opportunity to be creative by using hearts as some of the geometric shapes and in employing bright, cheerful colors on the original Unit Organizer and Expanded Unit Map.

10. *New Unit Self-Test Questions.* This space on the expanded map is used to write questions that the teacher and students will generate and answer as they explore the unit. For example, Figure 3 shows two questions that were added to the expanded unit map: "Why is Pluto no longer considered a planet?" and "What causes human beings to be weightless on other planets?"

Pre-service teacher perceptions of *The Unit Organizer Routine*

The most frequent observation of the pre-service bilingual teacher candidates is that using the Unit Organizer to plan an entire unit is a tremendous amount of work. While the university students do not actually plan an entire unit, the thematic unit assignment is one of their initial experiences in detailed planning for the classroom. For several students, the Unit Organizer assignment is also a first experience in precise daily lesson preparation. After the students present their units to the rest of the class, they reflect on the entire experience. One student sent an e-mail to the professor stating,

"During the process of the thematic unit, at first, I could not see where it was going. But after all the brainstorming, I understood your effort to make us understand the importance of a thematic unit."

Students were queried as to what were the easiest and most difficult aspects of completing the unit. Many students indicated that choosing the theme and identifying resources and activities were among less difficult phases of planning the unit. Others noted that finding "wonderful" books and songs was interesting and fun.

The concerns that were mentioned most often pertained to time management, choosing the right objectives, having enough information, not finding enough books in Spanish on a particular theme, selecting the appropriate level of difficulty for the public school students, and providing the correct amount of information. Lack of teaching experience contributes to several of the students' concerns. However, the somewhat intense nature of the unit assignment generally precipitates a certain degree of questioning for the pre-service teachers regarding the details and organization required to teach effectively.

Finally, students are asked to comment on what they perceive they have learned from the project. Selected student comments and reflections include the following:

"It is actually fun to plan different themes and activities."

"It takes a lot of brainstorming to make sure you know exactly what you will be teaching. You need to gain a lot of knowledge about your topic."

"As we planned the unit, we learned about the topic and learned to think out of the box."

"I thought it was hard. I didn't know it what was involved with planning for teaching."

"I learned that we need to use these organizers to plan ahead and be prepared to teach without difficulty. I learned

that I can do this.”

“I learned that this project is time-consuming, but the end result made me feel accomplished that we were able to create these lessons and that we were able to complete a thematic unit using the Unit Organizer.”

“I am so glad that I had the opportunity to learn how to plan a thematic unit with the Unit Organizer. I want to use it again so that I can be more familiar with it. It will help me to be more organized.”

Recommendations for teachers and administrators

After working with numerous pre-service teachers and their inservice mentors, the authors have gained useful knowledge regarding the challenges both sets of teachers face regarding not only their students, but also the pressure of high-stakes testing. Selected recommendations for teachers of ELLs follow:

- Pre-service and inservice teachers should be encouraged to explore thematic instruction as a viable tool in teaching ELLs.
- Pre-service teachers require ample preparation in systematically planning in an organized fashion.
- Pre-service teachers should be aware that specific, detailed lesson and unit planning takes time. Lack of subject area curricula complicates the planning process initially. Experience and practice will make the process less overwhelming. Pre-service and novice teachers will require much encouragement to refrain from giving up on the creative aspects of planning.
- Novice teachers and those who are unfamiliar with thematic instruction should start slowly and on a small scale. A

UNDERSTANDING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER

first attempt at thematic unit planning might include connections across only two content areas. Gradually, as the comfort level for planning and teaching thematically increases, content areas may be added to themes.

- While inservice teachers face substantial pressure to insure improved performance on high-stakes tests, it is essential to remember that there are many paths to the same goal of academic achievement. Thematic instruction that utilizes *The Unit Organizer Routine* enables educators to teach significant language and content area objectives in a creative and interesting manner that allows students to experience information in a variety of ways. The end result is usually enhanced learning and accomplishment.

Conclusion

Systematic planning for instruction is still considered to be a hallmark of effective teaching (Horwitz, 2008; Levine & McCloskey, 2009; Zainuddin et al., 2007). The children in tomorrow's classrooms will exhibit more diversity, ethnically, linguistically, and academically, than in previous eras (Green, 2006). Novice teachers will need to possess the knowledge and skills necessary for planning and teaching systematically and effectively if their students are to achieve in school. Students who are learning English as a second language desire to be successful in their endeavors to learn English and content area information concurrently. They can accomplish this if their teachers are knowledgeable and strongly prepared to teach creatively, in an organized fashion, and addressing multiple ways of learning while providing an active learning environment. The excellent preparation of new bilingual and ESL teachers for the real world of

school should include tools such as *The Unit Organizer Routine* to enable them in being the outstanding teachers the ELLs will need.

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