

# ***Using a Thematic Teaching Approach Based on Pupil's Skill and Interest in Social Studies Teaching***

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**Abstract** *This study investigates how social studies teachers can introduce pupil-centred activities into crowded classroom settings. This study, using qualitative research techniques, was undertaken in Social Studies and History Teacher Training Programs of Atatürk Faculty of Education at Marmara University, (1999-2002) and Istanbul Kartal Gürbüz Bora Elementary School (1998-2002). Research participants were prospective social studies and history teachers and an experienced social studies teacher from the institutions named above. The research is based on how pupils can use their enthusiasms, interests and skills in learning social studies subjects and history. In terms of orientation the study mirrors for pupils American findings that suggests that the prior knowledge and expertise of teachers in relation to their academic and professional backgrounds can have a profound influence upon their teaching styles. This study is about the use of a thematic teaching technique based on students' skills, its practice and advantages.*

**Key words** Curriculum, Educational policy, History, Pedagogy, Social Studies, Teaching techniques, Thematic teaching

## **Introduction**

To develop new theoretically based innovative teaching approaches based on different teaching methods and techniques or to represent an existing one, such as multiple-intelligence theory, raises problems about putting theory into practice.

Traditionally, in a thematic, integrated teaching approach based on Bruner's spiral curriculum concept, the task is practised concurrently by selecting appropriate content from the subject based curriculum (Proctor, Entwistle, Judge and McKenzie-Murdoch, 1995:61-69). Integration is generally used in a single class teacher system where usually the teacher teaches all curriculum subjects. This research introduces an approach whereby social studies or history courses can be planned for single subject thematic teaching. It is based on co-operative learning by using pupils' interests and skills without depending on other areas of the curriculum or other subject teachers' co-operation. It allows pupils to show their interests and use their skills. So, while the teacher fulfils educational requirements of the subject based curriculum, she/he also extends her/his teaching practice into interdisciplinary curriculum approach (see Erickson, 1995) by providing an effective co-operative learning environment in which pupils may use their skills which are developed in other areas of the curriculum.

It is thought that pupils' psychomotor, affective and cognitive skills can be improved through thematic teaching approach. According to this approach it is assumed that although students do not have all skills in relation to these domains, they can show interest and use some specific abilities to learn social studies.

Although educators rapidly assimilated Gardner's multiple intelligence theory there are problems about its practice<sup>1</sup> (see Armstrong 1994). Applicability of multiple intelligence depends upon detailed planning, rich teaching materials and teacher's difficulties in grouping pupils and activities according to perceived different intelligence which are actually not suitable for most classroom settings (activities for multiple intelligence see Bümen 2002). The approach introduced in this research enables mastery in learning by using pupils' different skills, aptitudes and interests to devise learning tasks that can motivate all pupils in classes of forty to fifty students. This approach is inclusive, engaging students who are classified as low-achievers as well as those of average and high ability.

The ideas about the applicability of the approach were discussed with colleagues and positive outcomes were also obtained from an experimental research undertaken by Yanpar-Sahin (2001) which was based on a constructivist approach and the approach was partly used in students' material making. As Vygotsky (1962) pointed out children who have different skills, learn from each other. So that while students learn by using their abilities in social studies, they also share their learning experiences with each other through group-work and its presentation. Groups' presentations provide opportunities to understand the task from different point of views. This is to say "mastery learning" can be realised by the approach. Yet Bloom (1998:5) says that if the kind and quality of teaching and the time for learning are suitable for the needs of students, then most of them will achieve the mastery learning in the task.

### **The research design & methodology: practising the approach/method used in the research**

The problem the curriculum research and development faced was how to use cooperative learning to engage pupils on the same task who have different interests and skills in social studies.

This was a two step research study. First, the researcher developed and implemented the approach in the "Teaching Methods" course in the Social Studies Teacher Training Program of Atatürk Faculty of Education at Marmara University. History, geography and citizenship courses in elementary curriculum were selected and the prospective teachers were asked to act in role as pupils. The approach shared many features of the demonstration-modelling-implementation cycle of cognitive apprenticeship. Then these student teachers were grouped according to their skills related to art, music, text-research, drama, model-material, poetry etc. The purpose of the approach was to provide different learning outcomes for each of the groups within the same task, so that all the subjects in elementary curriculum could be integrated in social studies course. In the research process, some prospective teachers also used the approach during "teaching practice" in some elementary schools between the years 2000-2002.

The second step between 1999 and 2002 involved an action research project designed with an experienced social studies teacher who works in Kartal Gürbüz Bora Elementary School. This paper is mostly relates to qualitative data gathered from this school. Action research provides the opportunity for developing deep understanding, explanations, interpretations and thoughtful richness about the learning process from the first hand as well as giving opportunities to the teacher to develop his/her teaching practice without depending on the other research tools such as surveys, achievement tests based on some statistical methods (see Cohen and Manion, 1994). Action research based on researcher's own experience is one of the research techniques that aims to gather data from natural settings. In using this approach since 1999 the social studies teacher taught history, geography and citizenship to her students.. Positive feedback was gathered during the development and practice of this approach, from both the teacher and the prospective elementary school teachers.

The following example was taken from a seventh grade social studies class in the research's elementary school. The teacher used thematic teaching for a history subject related to the "Conquest of Istanbul". In practising the approach, first groups were formed based on the according to pupils' skills, interests and wishes. Then the groups were named and these names were written on the board as:

- Drama
- Model-material building
- Music
- Scenario
- Text-research
- Poem
- Art
- Puzzle
- Anecdote-humour-caricature
- Reporters who travel in time (History Channel)

After organising the groups, each group discussed for five minutes how to study the "Conquest of Istanbul" and received help from the teacher during discussions. Then, each group was asked to find another group with whom they could collaborate. It was observed that the drama, scenario and history channel groups decided to study co-operatively, and the text-research group gave support to the puzzle and art groups through its ideas.

The following dialogue is related to groups' preparations for the subject:

Drama Group:

*Selçuk:* Ahmet, read the "Conquest of Istanbul" and write the names from the text.

*Kübra:* I think we need to co-operate with the scenario group.

*Ekrem:* Ok, but we have to choose people who are going to take roles in the drama.

*Ugur:* I am the director.

*Ekrem:* I wanna be the Conqueror [*Fatih Sultan Mehmet*]

*Sehri:* Get away! Everyone wants to be the Conqueror [*laughs*]

*Selçuk:* Ahmet, Have you found the characters which we dramatise?

*Ahmet:* It is difficult to find a role for everyone. Let's ask the teacher. [*He asks the teacher.*]

*Teacher:* One of you can play the Ulubatli Hasan, other can play Fatih's mother. Kubra you can play Fatih's father. Mustafa you can play Aksemsettin if you can dye your styled hair with a piece of chalk. [*laughs*]

*Kubra:* Teacher, I would like to be the speaker.

*Teacher:* Merve, would you like to be Fatih's mother?

*Sehri:* Teacher, you haven't given us any role.

*Teacher:* I just told my opinion because you wanted help, Sehri. Come on, you share the roles yourselves and work co-operatively with the scenario group, because you're going to play what they write.

The drama group decides to work co-operatively with the scenario group. They say that they decided about their roles and they have to write a scenario according to these roles. While the authors of the scenario group and a student who is the director of the drama group are working together, the other members of the drama group start to collect materials in the classroom to create the costumes. Among these materials, there is a scarf (*sarik*) a leather belt, colour pens, a piece of cartoon, and a long coat. They decide to use the desks as boats and horses etc.

While the music group is adapting one of the songs of Pop Star Tarkan's to the conquest, other groups are working in appropriate ways of their functions. After completing their work, each group performed their roles in front of the class, on the stage they had prepared. While doing these activities, the students used their imaginations, creative and critical ideas by doing historical empathy (for historical empathy see Dilek 2002) and using audio-visual activities.

After each group had performed, they were evaluated by the teacher and the other members of the class. They had to decide to what extent the activities reflected historical enquiry and reconstruction so the critical thinking skills of the students were used is also discussed (for critical thinking skills see Akinoglu 2002). As can be seen in the following examples, the students made their present learning more meaningful in the class by using their learning experiences they had gained outside the classroom.

### **Text-Research group**

In this work, the text research group prepared a documentary. The text of this documentary was read by the student who was the speaker.

"2<sup>nd</sup> Murat enthrones his son 2<sup>nd</sup> Mehmet claiming that he is old and tired but it does not go long. When the Varna Battle starts, he wants his father throne back and writes a letter to him:

[*a member of the group reads the letter aloud*]

"If you are the Sultan, it is against the rules not to be there when your country needs you. If I am the Sultan I order you to lead of the army. I remind you to obey my commands."

The poetry group adapted Orhan Veli's 'I am listening to Istanbul' to the Conquest of Istanbul:

"I am listening to Istanbul in ancient times, my eyes are closed.  
First, there is a small breeze  
The sound of the cannons beats the walls  
The sound of the swords of the soldiers that never ends  
I am listening to Istanbul, my eyes are closed  
While the Galleons are drawing back,  
From the heights, hills,  
The edge of a boat is touching the sea  
I am listening to Istanbul, my eyes are closed."

The anecdote/humour caricature group adapts a TV advertisement to the Conquest of Istanbul, an advertisement of a GSM company. They replaced the players Cem Yilmaz and Ajda Pekkan with Fatih and the Byzantine Emperor Constantine and the original dialogues were changed:

*Nurdan:* You're welcome to the advertisements of the History Channel First, Turkfatihcell is expanding its reaching area.

*[Fatih and Constantine meets in a park]*

*Mustafa:* My dear Constantine, Hi!

*[Constantine remains silent and with his mimics, he makes clear that he doesn't want to talk and keeps jogging]*

*Mustafa:* Why are you so depressed today? I am thinking of expanding my area of conquest as far as Istanbul. What's your opinion?

*[Constantine looks at him angrily]*

The model material building group produced the models of the walls of Istanbul and the boats used in the battle. The drawing group drew the pictures of Ulubatli Hasan erecting the Turkish flag on the walls and Fatih conquering the city. The time travelling reporter (he introduced himself as Ali Kirca) interviewed Fatih, Constantine and many other historical characters in his TV programme called 'History Arena' in the History Channel. The puzzle group prepared a hook puzzle and a crossword puzzle on the blackboard. The puzzles were prepared to be solved at the end of the second lesson for assessment purposes.

### *The role of the teacher in the application of the approach*

As can be seen, the teacher sometimes acts as if he/she is a guide and sometimes an interpreter in the preparation, application and evaluation stages of the approach.

When the teacher acts as guide s/he becomes the 'architect of learning' according to the Vygotsky's pedagogical perspective. When the teacher is the interpreter, s/he aims to reveal the critical and creative ideas of the students by evaluating both the products of their work and the process as they are working in their groups. At the end of the group work, the teacher shares his/her duty with the whole class and gives the students an opportunity to interpret and evaluate the other groups' performance. As you see, this technique involves both teaching and learning and so both the teacher and the students are at the centre of the learning activities.

The "active" and "passive" learning which are often misused, and do not apply herer. Learning is in fact "active", if the learning occurs. 'Passive learning' is not a useful term to describe the teaching techniques and learning activities. Even in instructional teaching if a student is thinking silently (there is no way for us to monitor this) it cannot be claimed that her/his role is "passive". So, we must avoid describing this learning process as "active" or "passive" or claiming that being "active" is the opposite of being "passive". In other words, the process of learning and teaching includes both the teacher and the student in the process in an "active" way.

The thematic teaching approach based on pupils' skills, specific abilities and interests, joining the activities in an active way occurs both in sides of the students and the teacher. In this process, the teacher acts many roles from being a guide to an interpreter.

## Discussion and conclusion

The evaluation of the quality of learning that the diverse approach promoted is difficult to gauge using standard performance tests that are designed to test a transmission mode of teaching and study that requires the assimilation of often sophisticated bodies of knowledge. The qualitative feedback indicated that in terms of oracy and motivation the approach had a positive impact upon the pupils. An important element in determining the applicability of a radical new pedagogy is if it has an adverse impact upon pupils who are taking the existing modes of assessment.

"The success evaluation exam" prepared by the Istanbul Directorate of National Ministry of Education (2001-2002) was used in this research to asses success levels of students in social studies for thematic teaching classes and direct teaching classes. In the research's elementary school, the teacher using the direct teaching method, gave importance to college preparation exams (Anatolia and technique lycees/high schools) and used the preparation tests, then did multiple test solving activities with his students. However, the teacher using the approach introduced here, did not do any preparation.

The students were considered successful if they answered 10 social studies questions out of 20 correctly. The following table shows the success rates of the classes in which the approach was used and the others the teacher used direct teaching method.

Table: The percentage of the students' success in the success evaluation exam

CLASSES	6 <sup>th</sup> grades		7 <sup>th</sup> grades		8 <sup>th</sup> grades		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Skills and Interest Centred Classes	83	51.	94	51.0	82	57.3	259	53.4
Direct Teaching Classes	81	41.	85	45.8	93	44.0	259	43.9
		8						
		9						

Results of the exam also show that in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes to which the approach is applied the number of the students who gave the "correct" answer to the 14 or more questions is 12 (14.5%). In the classes where this approach was not used the number of the students who gave the "right" answer to the 14 or more questions is 5 (6.2%). The 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes where the approach is applied, while the number of the students who gave 'right answer to the 14 or more questions is 13 (13.8%) in the other classes it is 9 (10.6%). Again in the 8<sup>th</sup> classes the percentage is 16 (19.5%) to 12 (12.9%).

In the classes in the school where the action research was undertaken, the academic success percentage is higher than in the classes that it is not used. At the same time, in the 2001-2002 academic year, when looking at the results, the students who are in the classes that the approach is used gave more 'correct' answers to the questions on the knowledge and interpretation level than the other students.

As can be known, the curriculum of social studies generally contains target behaviours that are at the level of knowledge and conception. With this approach pupils can master the task that is above their capacities by being aware of their cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills. These results can be perceived as the students who reach the application and advanced levels can easily answer the questions at a level that requires less thinking skills (knowledge and perception) by using their different skills.

At the same time this situation shows us that the educators who always criticize the curriculum must work on trying to answer the question: "what can be done?" It seems very difficult to gain the

aims of the curriculum with the translated theories without considering the fact that like in the other countries, also in Turkey, there is a tradition in education.

The application of this approach, is very important because it shows us that there are many things the teachers can do even with the central (ministry-originated) curriculum and it also shows that the teachers and the students can use their creativity.

## **Suggestions**

In summary, with this approach specially in history subjects, the pupils;

- can learn about the historical people and through developing historical imagination can try to understand the ways people in the past may have thought and felt,
- can work like "amateur social scientists" by using their research abilities,
- can take responsibilities in their groups to be able to learn co-operatively,
- can have fun while learning,
- can develop their speaking skills while discussing and interpreting.

For the teachers, they;

- use their time effectively and have every student involved in the learning process,
- spend time on creative and joyful activities because they do not have to transfer knowledge all the time,
- can find out the different skills and specific abilities of pupils and plan their curriculum according to these.

Concerning professional development, the paper suggests that a demonstration-modelling-implementation strategy enables student teachers to assimilate a sophisticated pedagogy, apply it in practice and, hopefully, assimilate it into their repertoire of teaching protocols that they can draw upon.

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