

Look Ma, No Text!

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For 20 years people have asked me "What text do you use?" I've learned not to say "We don't use texts!" right away, as that is sometimes seen as arrogance, ignorance, or a combination of the two. I now try to begin with something like "Well, although we have many books and use class sets from time to time in the classroom, and certainly as reference, we prefer not to use a specific text for a specific course." We don't want to set up the dynamic of "It's Tuesday, we must be on page 56."

Viewing the use of one specific text as constraining and as not necessarily meeting the students' varied needs, International Language Institute (ILI) uses an organic curriculum. Of course, every level has a guideline and general structural hierarchy for language acquisition. For example, we teach the present tense before the past tense since this is how we learn our first language.

We have had to train students in adapting to the organic curriculum concept. Sometimes at the beginning of a course students say that they would feel more secure with a text. At times we give them a text to use as a reference. We always, however, give them a notebook that we have divided into categories: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation/ intonation, readings, writing and misc. This becomes their text as teachers give them hole-punched handouts and they take their own notes. ILI's teachers share this philosophy of learning. We have monthly inservice workshops to keep ourselves on track.

Using a Wheel

So what does it mean to teach without a text? At ILI we use a wheel that shows the components of language—the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing)—surrounded by the tools (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation/ intonation) based in content and context on a bed of culture. If a lesson addresses all the categories in the wheel, we feel we are doing integrated activities in the classroom.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) operates on this principle. Other methodologies, such as Community Language Learning (CLL) and Silent Way, also incorporate integrated activities.

Theme-Based Classes at ILI

Here's an example of the wheel applied to the classroom. Taking the theme of the elections, October's classes often revolve around upcoming elections. The four skills revolve around the theme. For example:

- Speaking: Debates, group opinions, paired discussions.
- Listening: Invited speakers can talk about candidates and referendum questions; taped radio reports, videos of news reports or specials. (The movie *Thirteen Days* works for advanced classes.)
- Reading: Newspaper articles (headlines work for lower levels, *News for You* articles, mock ballots, candidate profiles.
- Writing: Sentence opinions (I like ___ because ___.); political ads and essays.
- Grammar: Lower Level: If ___ wins, s/he will ___.
Intermediate: If ___ won, s/he ___.
Advanced: If ___ had said/done ___, s/he ___.
- Vocabulary: Political terminology, basic to sophisticated.
- Pronunciation: You can get a lot of mileage out of terms like pledge, politician, and even the names of the candidates so students understand what people are talking about.
- Culture: Compare our electoral process to the one in students' own countries.

Using speakers and authentic materials helps bring the community into the classroom.

The Place of Texts

While studying a particular grammar point (conditional is mentioned above, but a teacher could introduce or help students practice the simple past, future, comparative, etc., students can use texts to practice a structure. While there is no need to rely on a text to introduce a structure that arises through the content of the lesson, extra practice through text-based activities can help solidify and deepen a student's understanding of a particular point in grammar or structure. For example, at ILI, we have found that *Grammar in Context* and *Grammar Dimensions* (Heinle and Heinle, 1996) are useful grammar workbooks when grammar practice is solidly based in content.

At ILI, we have found that we can use authentic materials 100% of the time for classroom activities and still cover all the modalities of learning. We can also address the various learning styles of students.

By basing instruction in authentic materials, not only will students end up learning and using new grammar structures and vocabulary, they will be also able to discuss important events that are happening around them.