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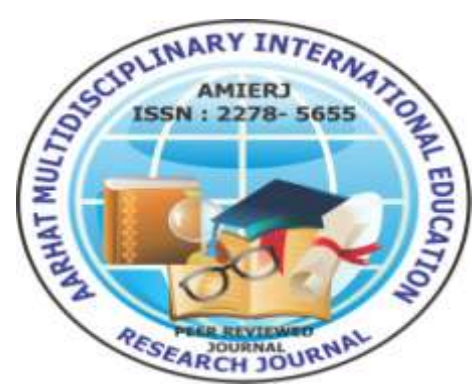
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**THEME BASED TEACHING AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS:  
INTEGRATING ELT WITH ECOLOGICAL ISSUES**

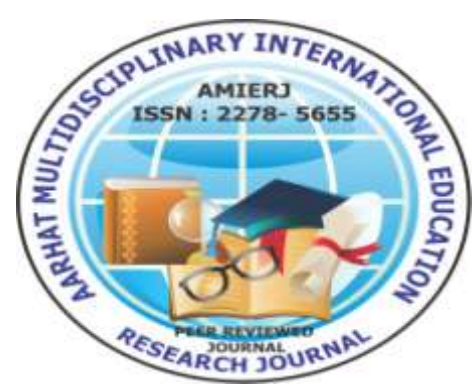
**Education**

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**Abstract:**

*Environmental issues like global warming, air pollution, biodiversity are interlinked with fundamental human rights today. In some parts of the world, people's basic rights are already being diminished because of food and water scarcities, home and job loss, and intensifying diseases, all of which affect the peace and security of individuals and their communities (Schuchard and Weston 2009). To illustrate in even more concrete terms, Oxfam International ([www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)) states that today's insufficient rains and disappearing glaciers already affect millions of lives around the world. As water supplies decrease, successful food production declines, thus resulting in hunger. These are just a few issues that illustrate why global climate change represents one theme of potential interest to language learners. Local environmental issues too appeal to the second language learners to a great extent. The increasing pollution and related maladies too provide appropriate issues for activities in the second language class. With the number of challenges that our planet faces today, raising students' environmental awareness and teaching them about grassroots movements for conservation of environment that they could engage in have emerged as a necessary component of education. Since language forms the vehicle of every human thought and expression, the language education naturally could not be left out.*

**Key Words:** *ELT, second language, education, environmental issues*



H. D. Brown in his plenary talk at TESOL '90, in San Francisco in 1990, titled "On Track to Century 2" asserts- "Global, peace and environmental issues intrinsically affect every human being on earth. These issues provide content for your content-based humanized ESL teaching of the 90's. We teachers have a mission, a mission of helping everyone in this world communicate with each other to prevent the global disaster ahead. The 90's are in your hands". The tendency to relate English Language Teaching to global issues and human life in general is thus not new. Language being very organic in nature and essence, it was increasingly realized that English language teaching, even teaching of second language could no longer be an isolated from greater global concerns. English language teaching professionals have seen how English contributes to their students' education, economic status, and competitiveness and how globalization has made nations more interconnected and interdependent. In the late 1980s, in response to the changing world, important topics including human rights and environmental education were embraced by teachers around the globe and introduced into language classrooms as shown by Brown (1991) in his essay titled "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Teach Environmental Awareness and Action in Your English Language Classroom" published in *The Language Teacher*, volume 15 (p. 4-5). Today, issues related to the environment (e.g., global warming, air pollution, biodiversity) are interlinked with fundamental human rights. In some parts of the world, people's basic rights are already being diminished because of food and water scarcities, home and job loss, and intensifying diseases, all of which affect the peace and security of individuals and their communities (Schuchard and Weston 2009). To illustrate in even more concrete terms, Oxfam International ([www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)) states that today's insufficient rains and disappearing glaciers already affect millions of lives around the world. As water supplies decrease, successful food production declines, thus resulting in hunger. Oxfam predicts that future climate change will further undermine basic human rights. We are likely to see floods and rising sea levels cause displacement or death among populations living in coastal areas. Moreover, lack of water supplies will reduce sanitation efforts, resulting in the spread of illnesses. These are just a few issues that illustrate why global climate change represents one



theme of potential interest to language learners. Local environmental issues too appeal to the second language learners to a great extent. Lack of rain and poor crop production or the soaring temperatures and untimely depressions are of direct relevance and interest to the students in any English class. The increasing pollution and related maladies too provide appropriate issues for activities in the second language class. With the number of challenges that our planet faces today, raising students' environmental awareness and teaching them about grassroots movements for conservation of environment that they could engage in have emerged as a necessary component of education. Since language forms the vehicle of every human thought and expression, the language education naturally could not be left out.

Ecological issues and real life concerns are integrated in the English language classroom in order to achieve **three primary objectives**. They are –

- i. heighten students' interest in contemporary issues that might directly influence their futures
- ii. teach students how to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable world, and
- iii. Promote language learning and meaningful communication.

### **Types of Environmental education and ELT**

The NEEF (U.S. National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF, [www.neefusa.org](http://www.neefusa.org)) describes three levels of environmental education:

- i. Environmental awareness— general familiarity with key environmental issues,
- ii. Personal conduct knowledge - translates awareness into action to preserve the environment, and
- iii. Environmental literacy - enables students to learn underlying principles and gain skills for carrying out their own hands-on projects (Paterson 2010).

Inculcating all these three levels of environmental education to address ecological issues in a student through language education in the second language classroom, calls for new



approaches. The two most significant and popular practices are content based instruction that practically integrates content with language in the classroom, and theme based teaching that too attempts an integration of the content with the language but through activities centered around definite predetermined themes. In both the practices the real life or the outer world is brought into the language classroom and naturally rely heavily on activities and projects. Activities get so much importance in these approaches since environmentally friendly actions inside and outside the classroom lend themselves to meaningful language use. For instance, apparently it may seem improbable that a practice like waste reduction may have any impact on language learning, but classroom discussions about the importance of “green” habits may lead to authentic communication and, at the same time, increase the likelihood that students will put their newly acquired knowledge into practice. For example, before encouraging students for writing on both sides of paper or reduce wastage of paper, teachers can introduce the topic of conservation and the importance of saving trees as part of a speaking-listening activity.

Theme based teaching emphasizes certain tasks under the umbrella of certain themes regarding second language learning. It is a pedagogical model based on the **selection of a theme or topic of study**. In the words of Heino Limets, “*An integrated whole is greater than the sum total of its parts*”. Halliwell (1992) suggests that the links between the foreign language classroom and other lessons can work in several directions, as mentioned below:

- other subject areas, such as math or art, can offer teaching techniques and activities, as well as content, that can be used in the foreign language classroom;
- foreign language lessons can provide content for other subjects areas;
- whole subject lessons can be taught in the foreign language.

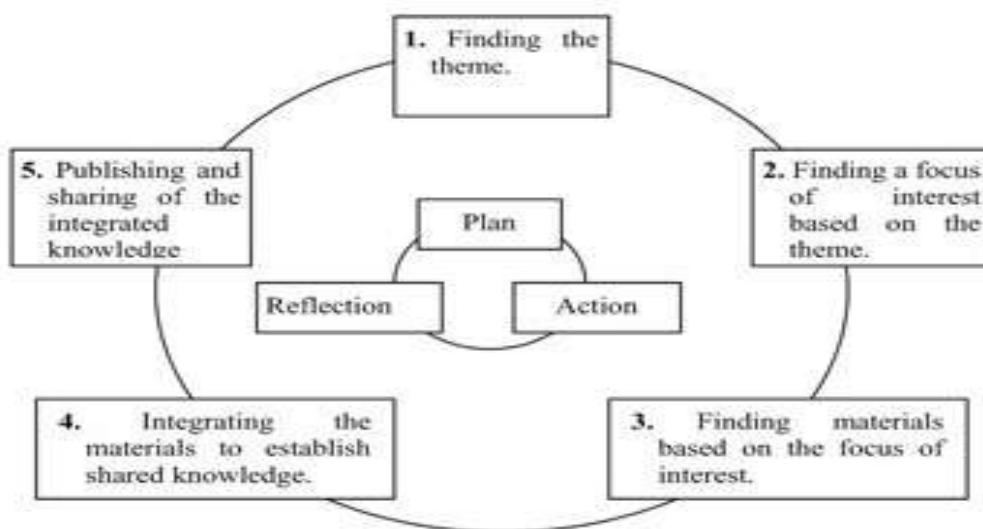
Theme-based teaching can be used in large or small amounts, and in varying concentrations. In concentrated form, and in skilled hands, it could replace course book and syllabus together. More realistically, it can be adopted for one or two lessons in a week, or for several weeks in a term, to supplement other work, and to help teachers build up the skills and knowledge that are demanded. Even when the course book is used fairly closely, theme-based

ideas can provide extra activities. Many course books use topics or themes to structure their units, although this is often a superficial covering for a grammatical or functional sequencing.

Such an approach entails the following steps:

- (a) finding the theme
- (b) finding a focus of interest based on the theme and relating it to language learning
- (c) Establishing a time frame
- (d) finding materials based on the focus of interest;
- (e) integrating the materials to establish shared knowledge;
- (f) publishing and sharing the integrated knowledge

Huang, Liu, Chu, and Cheng(2007) have presented the process diagrammatically in the following manner:



Source: Huang, Liu, Chu, and Cheng, 2007.

The “material” constitutes of various subjects or content areas related to the central theme and transacted in the target language. The idea is that the needs of the content classes determine or govern the needs of the language class.



### **1. Finding the theme**

Themes should be collected based on experiences in everyday life. The instructor can prepare several topics beforehand for the students to choose from, or can allow the students to interact with each other, brainstorming before settling on some topics they would like to learn about, then putting "like-minded" students in the same group, since Thematic learning is "student-interest oriented." The theme needs to be one that can be understood through the individual experience, but, it must also be capable of extending beyond the individual person to have meaningful connections in the larger framework of human experience – family, school, community, ecological systems. This stage includes three steps: (a) requesting or proposing themes; (b) voting on themes [contributes to student autonomy and generates motivation]; (c) forming groups.

### **2. Finding a focus of interest based on the theme and relating it to language learning**

After finding a theme in the previous stage, this stage extends the core theme into other fields and look for the theme's focus of interest. This is called a sub-theme and is usually chosen from these fields. Since different people have different interests, there are different centers of interest, which the group members evaluate to ensure the quality of the content based theme. Having identified sub-themes and guiding questions by taking a 'content perspective' on the theme, planning now has to bring a 'language-learning perspective' to it, so that planning moves from content to FL classroom activities, with discourse types and aspects of language use guiding the construction of language learning tasks with clear goals and stages.

5. Learning language through theme-based teaching entails certain dimensions that must be kept in mind while devising strategies to integrate English language teaching-learning with various contents. Some of them are as follows:

- a. The language learning potential of theme-based teaching
- b. Learning vocabulary



- c. Language learning through 'communicative stretching'
- d. Learning discourse skills
- e. Motivation to precision in language use
- f. Outcomes and products from theme-based learning

### **3. Establishing a time frame for the project**

The time frame must be fixed carefully working out how long to be spent on each part of the process. The timing of the procedure should be a strict guide for the student to encourage serious attention in order to develop time management skills.

### **4. Finding materials based on the focus of interest**

This stage can be divided into two steps:

- (a) Collecting materials;
- (b) Arranging materials.

A "resource team" may be identified from different content teachers and subject experts to provide the content for the students. The resource team must reflect the intention of the project to move beyond individual experience and examine as broad a range of potential related issues as possible. Field trips may be arranged when the student's intense period of discovery and analysis begins. The field trip is in most cases, the event from which the student's ideas are generated and it is often through this shared experience that a real sense of community spirit and collaboration amongst the students develops.

### **5. Integrating the theme to establish shared knowledge**

This stage can be divided into two steps: (a) knowledge exchange and evaluation within the group; (b) completing an integrated report, based on the mutual evaluation and corrections in the previous step.





6. Sharing the Integrated Knowledge through wall magazines, journals, symposia, debates, student seminars etc remain interesting modes of exercises in linguistic structures centered around the content.

Increasing target language use in theme-based teaching may be a necessary pre-requisite for effective content based instruction. Some of the common strategies by which this may be achieved are -

- a. Inserting choices or decision-making
- b. Giving feedback to each other
- c. Encouraging private speech in the foreign language
- d. Background language exposure

Themes selected for Content based instructions are principally based on four categories of approach. They are

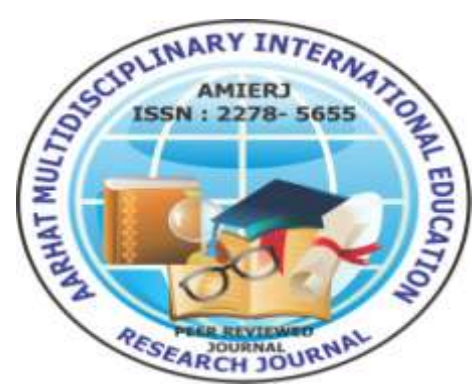
- Interdisciplinary Approach
- Multidisciplinary Approach and
- Intra disciplinary Approach
- Cross Disciplinary Approach

**Multi-disciplinary analysis** – examines a theme from multiple perspectives, without making a concerted effort to systemically integrate disciplinary perspectives.

**Inter-disciplinary analysis** – examines a theme from multiple perspectives, leading to a systematic effort to integrate the alternative perspectives into a unified or coherent framework of analysis.

**Intradisciplinary Approach** – examines a theme in relation to the various subskills inherent within a discipline, like reading, writing, listening comprehension and speaking .

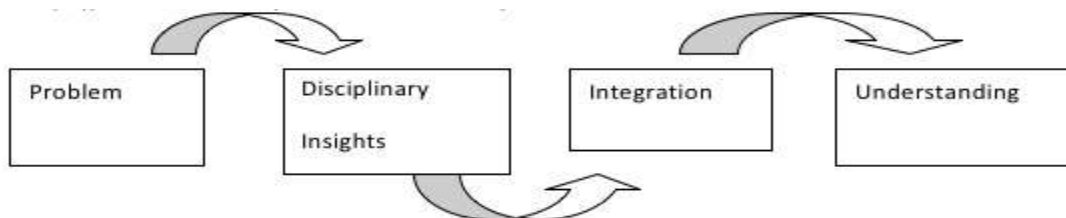
**Cross-disciplinary analysis** – examines a theme typically germane to one discipline through the lens of another discipline (i.e., how physicists explore music, sociological perspectives on the purpose of religion).



*Interdisciplinary Approach* is the most commonly used approach for theme base teaching. Interdisciplinary instruction entails the use and integration of methods and analytical frameworks from more than one academic discipline to examine a theme, issue, question or topic. Interdisciplinary education makes use of disciplinary approaches to examine topics, but pushes beyond the immediate connotation taking insights from a variety of relevant disciplines, synthesizing their contribution to understanding, and then integrating these ideas into a more complete, and hopefully coherent, framework of analysis. Interdisciplinary teaching is different from multi- or cross-disciplinary teaching in that it requires the integration and synthesis of different perspectives rather than a simple consideration of multiple viewpoints. Allen Repko, Director of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program for the School of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington, and his co-author James Welch encourage instructors to follow the follow 9-steps to prepare to implement interdisciplinary approach for theme based teaching :

1. *Define* problems, issues, topics or questions that warrant interdisciplinary examination
2. *Present* a clear rationale for taking interdisciplinary approach including the advantages to be gained
3. *Identify* relevant disciplines
4. *Conduct* a literature review (what is known on the topic from each of the disciplines)
5. *Develop* a command of each relevant discipline set out the analytical structure central to each discipline, identify key underlying assumptions, and methods of evaluation.
6. *Study* the problem and generate insights including predictions from each of the relevant disciplines - in isolation!!
7. *Identify* conflicts between and/or areas of complementary between the insights offered from each discipline
8. *Create* common ground by developing a cohesive framework of analysis that incorporates insights from the relevant disciplines in a systematic manner

9. *Combine* disciplinary insights to construct new more integrated understanding of the problem

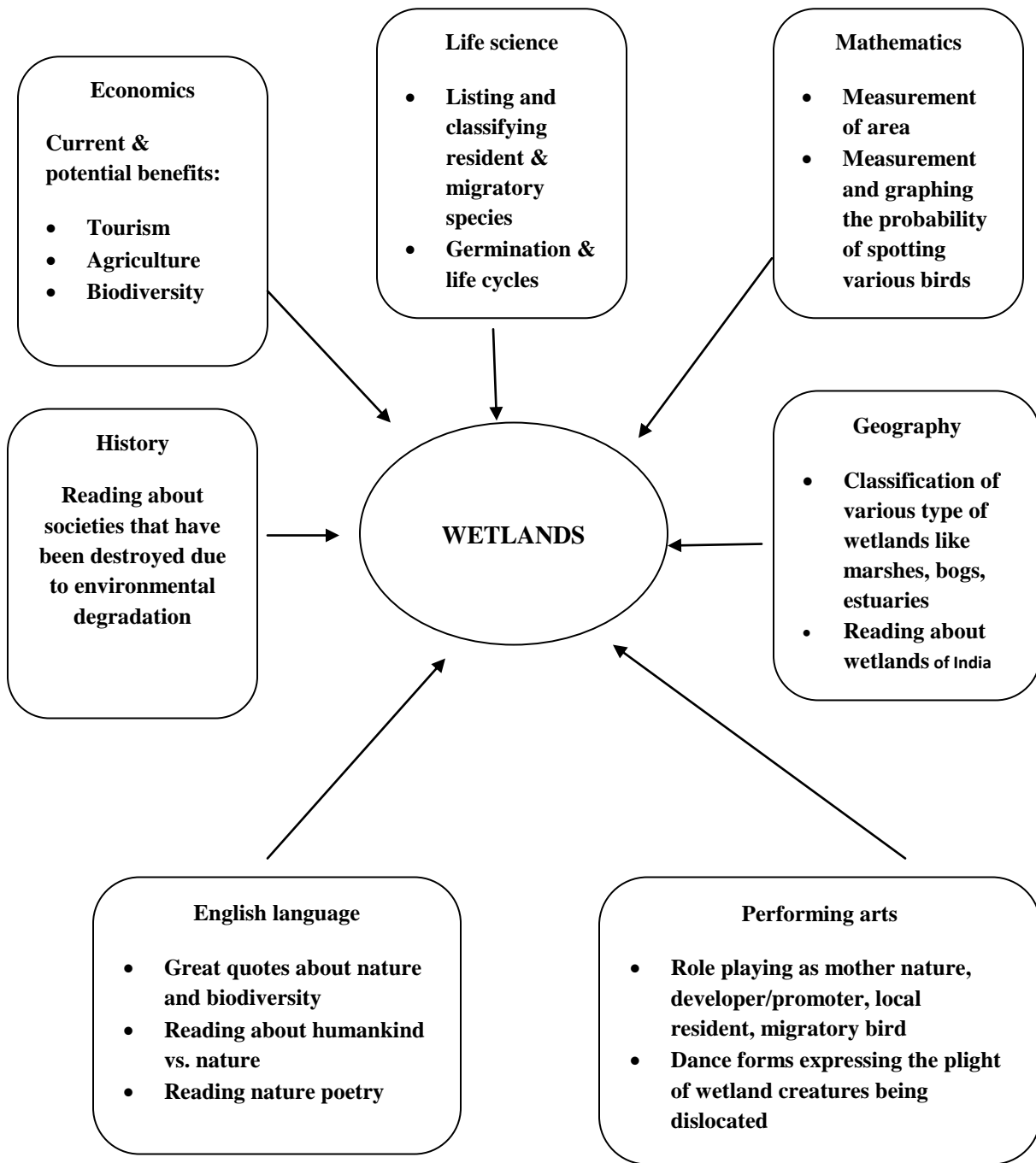


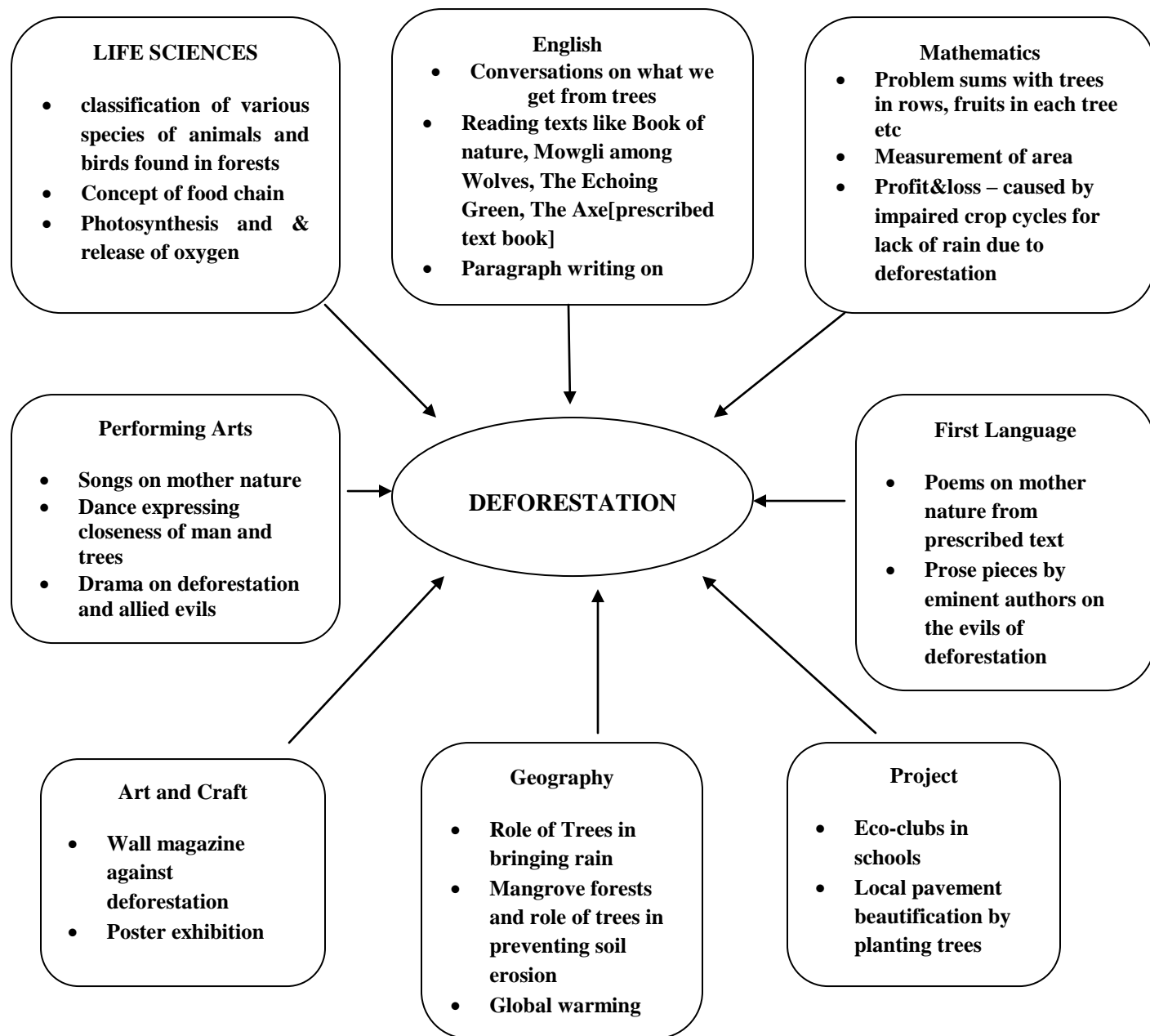
Practising Interdisciplinary thinking is important. Students must be engaged in practising interdisciplinary thinking by reenacting what they observe in the classroom, as the above mentioned steps are followed by the teacher. It is an effective way to acquire this higher order cognitive skill. Students can be assigned the task of rethinking an issue discussed in a discipline based manner in class by bringing another discipline to bear and then attempting to synthesize and integrate their analysis.

**Planning the content** is also of paramount importance for effective theme teaching. Two basic planning tools for theme-based teaching are brainstorming and webs. Both techniques allow the connection of ideas in non-linear ways, reflecting the learning process that we are aiming to produce. Brainstorming is a mental process that starts with one idea and then sparks off others through random and spontaneous links.

A ‘web’ is a way of writing down ideas and connections without forcing them into linear form as in a list or in text. The main idea or topic is put in the centre of the paper or board, and connecting ideas written around it, with lines showing connecting. This notion help start the brainstorming process.

**Two webs are illustrated below to show how English Language teaching activities may be related to ecological issues:**







The time has come for English second language teachers to rise to the need of the hour and integrate the language class with the burning issues of the day. Language is organic and develops with society and evolving human life. Language education cannot thus remain confined to lifeless exercises of linguistic skill with little or no relation with the threats that loom large over the human race in general. Theme based teaching emerges as an important modality that successfully integrates ELT with environmental awareness for a wholesome education needed for sustainable development.

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