

Seasonal Activities as the Basis for Language Curriculum

A popular approach to language curriculum is to base it on the traditional round of seasonal activities, in each month or other period covering language associated with an activity traditionally conducted at that time. Although this is a reasonable approach to including seasonal cultural activities, it is actually a very bad basis for a language curriculum, for several reasons.

1. Many important cultural activities take place in July and August when school is not in session. Much fishing, gathering and processing of plants and berries, hunting and travel take place during summer vacation. Following a seasonal curriculum means omitting these important activities
2. Many important cultural topics are not seasonal. Kinship, the clan system, the potlatch, most aspects of spirituality, the system of government, and geography and place names, among other things, are only seasonal in limited respects, if at all.
3. Many important parts of the vocabulary are not likely to be considered as of particular cultural interest. Language learners need to learn the parts of the body, the names for people of different ages and sexes (boy, girl, baby, elder, etc.), the names for pieces of clothing and the verbs for putting them on, wearing them, and taking them off, the verbs of motion, the system for expressing location and direction, the numbers, the verbs describing bodily functions, illnesses, and medicine, and many other parts of the vocabulary, most of which are not considered to be of particular cultural importance and are likely to be omitted from any culture-based curriculum, all the more so a seasonal curriculum.
4. The grammar, an essential component of language learning, is not seasonal and is not a cultural topic. In theory grammar can be covered as it comes up, but in practice it is almost always omitted or downplayed at the expense of seasonal cultural topics. Moreover, the order in which grammatical topics arise in a seasonal curriculum is not necessarily a good order in which to teach them. Some aspects of the grammar are simpler than others, some don't make sense until others are understood, and some are of great generality while others are very narrow.
5. Seasonal activities repeat from year to year but the curriculum should not. In theory each year more advanced or other aspects of seasonal topics can be covered, or other seasonal activities introduced, but in practice seasonal curricula have a very strong tendency to repeat themselves. This severely limits the amount of language that children learn.

To some extent the problems mentioned are not, strictly-speaking, inherent in a seasonal curriculum and can be overcome by careful attention, but some, such as the non-seasonal character of many topics and of the grammar, cannot. In practice, although some seasonal curricula are successful as culture curricula, they are rarely successful as language curricula.