

Integrated thematic instruction in the environment of Czech primary schools: A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) (now also Highly Effective Teaching) is a type of teaching based primarily on one long-term unifying theme and its subsequent elaboration into branching themes and skills. Although the basic principles of ITI are reflected in the concept of the Czech curriculum, specifically in its project form (the Framework Educational Programme for Primary Education), there is only sporadic information on how ITI is used in pedagogical practice. The aim of this national cross-sectional study with a questionnaire was to determine the awareness of first-grade primary school teachers about the ITI model and to further focus on and explore selected applications of ITI in pedagogical practice. Only 23% of the teachers surveyed use the ITI model, and a higher level of awareness correlates with more frequent use. Teachers often use ITI in their practice in the form of one-day or weekly topics, and natural sciences are the most represented teaching areas. In most cases, teachers create their own materials for the ITI application. Still, they would welcome new ones (even though in 43% of cases, they consider the number of materials sufficient).

Key words: Integrated Thematic Instruction, basic education, study, practice, questionnaire

Introduction

Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) (now also Highly Effective Teaching) is an educational model proposed by Susan Kovalik in California (USA) in the 1990s to improve student performance while increasing the number of satisfied teachers (Kovalik & Olsen, 1995). The model's origins can be traced back to the 1970s (Puspita et al., 2020). Initially, the author aimed to meet the educational needs of mainly gifted and talented students with this approach (Kašová, 2013; Puspita et al., 2020). However, decades later, the author also focused on "regular" students. The model was described in detail by its author in 1993 (Kovalik & Olsen, 1995). Since its inception, the model has been continuously developed and updated, resulting in transforming the model (Highly Effective Teaching model) at the turn of the century.

ITI is based on knowledge about the human brain's functioning in learning (Kolář, 2012). ITI is then defined as an open educational model primarily based on one year-round unifying theme and its elaboration into branching topics and skills (Kovalik & Olsen, 1995). This theme should reflect on real life while also appealing to the pupil's leisure time, thereby making a tangible impact on the pupil's life. Such a comprehensive approach to Integrated Thematic Instruction is rarely encountered. Often, it is a one-day or weekly version of Integrated Thematic Instruction (Hesová, 2011). The unifying vehicle is the central theme, and the sub-themes of instruction are implemented in several subjects (Hesová, 2011). According to Kovalik and Olsen (1995), ITI ensures continuity of overall development in pupils or students and promotes curriculum integration. Street (1993) argues that a significant advantage of the model is that instead of fragmenting the day into blocks of time for individual subjects, the teacher can link multiple subjects and specific topics. Bredekamp (1987) affirms that the ITI method is not just about teaching in narrowly defined subject areas but that student development and the learning process are integrated.

In general, Integrated Thematic Instruction contains elements of integrated and thematic teaching. It consists of the intersection of these educational approaches (Bírešová, 2021), which are characterised by intersubjectivity and interdisciplinarity (thanks to integrated and thematic teaching, cross-curricular links in the content of individual teaching subjects can be applied more effectively, especially the connection of theoretical knowledge with practical activities of students) (Podroužek, 2002). Interdisciplinarity and intersubjectivity are among the basic principles of the Czech Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2023).

Over the last 30 years, this model has spread all over the world, especially to Canada, Europe (Finland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, etc.) (Piovarčiová, 2007), Asia (Indonesia), Africa, and among other countries (Chumdari, 2018). There are dozens of associations providing educational courses on this topic internationally. Susan Kovalik herself

headed the Center for Effective Learning from 1988-2015. After Susan Kovalik's retirement, the Center for the Future of Public Education (Center for the Future of Public Education, 2023) in the USA and countless other associations worldwide are now dedicated to the model. There are also scholarly publications (Razaei, 2023) and experimental research studies (Novidha, 2022).

Integrated Thematic Instruction also has its place in Czech education, but according to some authors, there are several obstacles to its wider use in practice. There is a lack of professional publications, teaching texts or a coherent concept based on the integrated curriculum and the principles of Integrated Thematic Instruction (Kuchnová, 2011), and information about the method is fragmented in several publications by different authors and with different focuses (Čapek, 2015; Kašová, 2013; Kolář, 2012; Podroužek, 2002; Rakoušová, 2008). For practical needs, teachers can find several teaching materials (of varying quality). Still, these are mainly web portals, initiatives of individuals or organisations such as Učitelnice (Učitelnice, 2024), Začít spolu/Step by step (Začít spolu, 2024). A comprehensive teaching approach is not yet available. The low elaboration of the didactic transformation of scientific knowledge into didacticised knowledge for Integrated Thematic Instruction is also problematic. On a practical level, the unpreparedness of teachers to apply Integrated Thematic Instruction may also be an obstacle. All these facts are based mainly on the empirical experience of the authors, as research studies focused on ITI have been conducted only in the context of isolated doctoral theses (Jeská, 2012; Kmošková, 2014). These graduate theses mainly focus on the development of teaching materials (Kmošková, 2014), integrated course designs (Bírešová, 2021) or reflection on ITI implementation (Jachymiáková, 2015).

This may be why Integrated Thematic Instruction has not been introduced into schools more comprehensively and broadly (Podroužek, 2002). Based on the international experience with ITI, its expansion could be expected to help improve pupils' learning outcomes (Lubis et al., 2020) and strengthen the cross-curricular nature of teaching, one of the key principles of education programmes. However, further research (e.g., a home-based intervention study) and support for applying ITI in practice would be desirable to build on more reliable evidence of its use in Czech education, which is why this national cross-sectional study was undertaken. Its main objective was to:

- to determine the level of awareness of ITI among primary school teachers (including schools for pupils with special educational needs),
- to find out the frequency of its use,
- to investigate the influence of some mediating factors that may be related to the application of ITI in pedagogical practice (demographic factors, type of school, gender, and length of experience).

A secondary objective was to determine:

- what are the modes of application and areas in which Czech first-grade teachers use ITI,
- to explore the views of these teachers related to ITI materials and current ITI education opportunities.

Methodology

This is a quantitative cross-sectional study with a non-standardised self-administered questionnaire. Before data collection, a pilot study was conducted on a small sample of respondents to test the items' clarity and the questionnaire's process. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc approved the study.

The following inclusion criteria were set for the participants:

- These are teachers at the first level of primary school, including schools for pupils with special educational needs.
- The typical age range of pupils these teachers teach is 6-11 years.
- Teachers work within the Czech Republic.

It was considered an exclusive criterion if the teachers belong to other teaching staff, e.g. teaching assistants or if they currently teach only at the second level of primary schools.

The participants were recruited through electronic communication addressed to the principals of all 4261 primary schools listed in the Register of Schools and School Facilities of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic. A total of 700 respondents from 14 regions of the Czech Republic completed the questionnaire (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2023). For the research, respondents were divided according to four criteria into subgroups, namely by length of experience (Table 1), age (Table 2), municipality size (Table 3) and gender (Table 4).

Table 1. Length of experience

Length of experience	Frequency	
Responses	absolute	relative
0-5 years	111	15,9 %
6-10 years	76	10,9 %
11-20 years	147	21,0 %
21-30 years	176	25,1 %
31+ years	190	27,1 %
Total	700	100 %

The categories for length of experience were determined according to Urbánek (1998) and Marounová and Kácovský (2023).

Table 2. Age

Age	Frequency	
Responses	absolute	relative
20-35	112	16,0 %
35-50	272	38,9 %
50-65	311	44,4 %
65+	5	0,7 %
Total	700	100 %

Age categories were determined according to Langmeier and Krejčířová (2006) and Vágnerová (2005).

Table 3. Municipality size

Municipality size	Frequency	
Responses	absolute	relative
Large city	187	26,7 %
Medium-sized city	98	14,0 %
Small city	175	25,0 %
Township	47	6,7 %
Village	193	27,6 %
Total	700	100 %

The categories for the municipality size were determined according to the Czech Statistical Office (2021).

Table 4. Gender

Gender	Frequency	
Responses	absolute	relative
Female	656	93,7 %
Male	42	6,0 %
Other	2	0,3 %
Total	700	100 %

The study population was predominantly female, 94%, with the remaining 6% male. The average age of the respondents was 47 years, and the average length of experience was 21 years. All 14 regions of the Czech Republic participated in the study with the following percentages: the capital city of Prague 9%, the Central Bohemian Region 16%, the South Bohemian Region 4%, the Plzeň Region 4%, the Karlovy Vary Region 1%, the Ústí nad Labem Region 3%, the Liberec Region 5%, the Hradec Králové Region 5%, the Pardubice Region 7%, the Vysočina Region 4%, the South Moravian Region 8%, the Zlín Region 8%, the Olomouc Region 12%, the Moravian-Silesian Region 14%. According to the location of the schools, the population was divided as follows: large city 27%, medium-sized city 14%, small city 24%, township 7% and village 28%.

Data collection and processing

A self-constructed questionnaire was used to collect data, as there are currently no standardised questionnaires with the required focus available in Czech transcription. The questionnaire consists of an introduction, individual

items, and supplementary data. The questionnaire's introduction briefly explains the research study's purpose and aim and describes the Integrated Thematic Instruction model. In this section, respondents are reminded of the anonymity and voluntary nature of the questionnaire survey and are thanked for participating in the research study.

The questionnaire contains a total of 16 items. The items are ordered according to the purpose for which the item is intended. The questionnaire consists of items formulated as instructions and open or closed items (dichotomous, semi-closed, scaled items). The first two items of the questionnaire are filter items. The questionnaire also contains control items. The questionnaire is dominated by items asking for facts, opinions, and views (Chráska, 2016). The individual items of the questionnaire are constructed in such a way that the questionnaire fulfils the set objectives. The questionnaire is designed following the knowledge acquired during the literature study. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents provide information regarding age, gender, length of experience and the type of school they are currently working at (geographical distinction - whether it is an urban or rural school). Data collection began on 1 September 2023 and was completed on 1 December 2023.

The data analysis began by checking the correctness and completeness of the completed questionnaires. Questionnaires that were incorrectly or incompletely filled were removed from the study. The results were evaluated using Pearson's chi-square for the contingency table, at the specified degrees of freedom and for the chosen significance level (0.05%) and Spearman's correlation coefficient. Scaled items were evaluated using the T-test. The statistical hypotheses defined in this section are included in the appendices. Statistica 14 software (Statistica.pro, 2024) was used to process the data.

The questionnaire was available in an online form with a hyperlink or QR code. Survio was used to distribute and create the online questionnaire. If required, the questionnaire was also available in hard copy for use by any of the schools (no one requested hard copies of the schools).

Results

The results of the study were related to the level of awareness of ITI among primary school teachers, the frequency of its use and the effects of the following factors: demographic factors, types of schools, gender, and length of experience. As additional information, the methods and areas of application of ITI, teachers' views on ITI-related materials, and ways of educating teachers about the model were also surveyed.

RQ (research question) 1: Teachers' awareness of the Integrated Thematic Instruction model

Two hundred thirty-eight respondents (34%) are aware of the ITI, but only 162 (23%) use the ITI model in their teaching practice. This implies that 77% of respondents do not use the model or are not familiar with it.

The items were further elaborated on, and relationships between different groups of respondents (age, length of experience, gender, region) were investigated. No statistically significant relationship was found between the variables.

RQ 2: Frequency of use of the Integrated Thematic Instruction model in practice

Respondents most frequently use the Integrated Thematic Instruction model with a frequency of once a month (38%), with roughly equal percentages using the model once every six months (22%) and once a week (23%). Respondents least frequently use the model daily (13%) and once a year (4%).

No statistical significance was found when analysing the relationships between the frequency of ITI application and the different groups of respondents (distribution by age and length of teaching experience). However, there were statistically significant relationships between respondents' awareness and frequency of ITI use ($r_s=0.289$; $p<0.5$). Thus, respondents' awareness of ITI influences the frequency of use of the Integrated Thematic Instruction model in pedagogical practice, and it is true that as awareness increases, the frequency of its use in practice also increases (H1). On the other hand, the frequency of ITI use is not related to the completion of training events on the ITI model (H2), but a significant relationship between the frequency of use of the model and respondents' experience was confirmed ($r_s=0.287$; $p<0.5$), with the better experience respondents have with the model, the higher the frequency of use.

Concerning the frequency of use of the model, respondents were asked what would lead them to increase the frequency of its use. The following motivators were mentioned by respondents: support from colleagues and sharing experiences with colleagues, support from management, more time (in class, for preparation), practical demonstrations, education, availability of literature, teaching materials, interest of pupils, attractiveness for pupils, fewer pupils in the class, financial reward, sufficient space in the curriculum and easier preparation of teaching materials. Respondents who use the model in their teaching practice feel sufficiently motivated to use it and rate the ITI model as very practical or effective on a scale from very effective to very ineffective. No negative ratings were recorded.

RQ 3: Methods of application and areas of Integrated Thematic Instruction

By “Modes of application of the ITI model”, we mean whether teachers use the ITI for one day, one week, or one month or the most comprehensive form of Integrated Thematic Instruction, a year-long theme. From the results, it can be concluded that teachers often use Integrated Thematic Instruction as one-day or weekly themes in their practice.

Regarding subject areas, teachers most often select topics to integrate educational content from natural sciences, social studies, and arts and culture. In addition, in one of the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate specific topics that they apply in practice using the model. For better clarity, the topics were categorised into the following groups: natural science topics, health topics, social topics, geographical topics, and cultural topics. For each group, the most frequent representatives are listed:

- health topics - human body, healthy lifestyle, human being,
- natural science topics - animals, birds, fruit and vegetables, trees, landscape,
- geography topics - our region, our city, where I live, the universe, travelling around the world,
- environmental protection - recycling,
- cultural topics - important days, national holidays, important personalities, professions, family.

RQ 4: Teachers' views on materials related to Integrated Thematic Instruction and ways of educating teachers about this model.

While 43% of respondents said that they considered the number of materials already available for teaching sufficient, when asked if they would like to increase the number of materials available for teaching, most respondents answered positively (80%). Respondents were also asked what materials they would be interested in. Worksheets and video or audio recordings were the most common responses. Only 12% of respondents would welcome a textbook as a classical didactic support.

Related to these findings is the item that asked whether respondents create their materials or use other people's materials. Here, an absolute majority (80%) of those prepared their own materials. Focusing on education, in most cases, respondents had not attended an educational event (60%). When respondents had participated in an academic event, they were asked to provide the name of the educational event in an open-ended question. These mainly were the following: seminars at universities, webinars, educational events of the step-by-step organisation (Začít spolu), summer schools, webinars of the digital marketplace Učitelnice, Montessori educational courses, Nauczanie integrowane - Cieszyn, Poland, Highly Effective Learning course in Bratislava.

Discussion

This study found that only 23% of the teachers surveyed use the ITI model and that the level of awareness influences the frequency of its use in practice. Teachers often use ITI in their practice in the form of one-day or weekly topics, and natural science is the most represented among the teaching areas. In most cases, teachers create their materials for ITI application. Still, they would welcome new teaching materials (even though in 43% of cases, they consider the number of materials sufficient).

In the Czech educational research environment, it is possible to compare the findings of this study with only one existing study, namely the research study by Jeská (2012). This was conducted in 16 primary schools in the South Moravian, Moravian-Silesian and South Bohemian regions (n=60 first-grade primary school teachers). Respondents in the Jeská (2012) study most often reported that they had been introduced to the basic principles of ITI while studying at university, which corresponds with the data obtained in this cross-sectional study. Furthermore, Jeská (2012) focused on respondents' awareness regarding taking a course focusing on the ITI model. Here, the majority (83%) of respondents answered that they had not taken the course. Compared to the results of the cross-sectional study (60% had not attended any training event), the frequency of negative responses is higher.

The results of this study are also thematically related to the research study of Bortlíková and Válek (2017), who used semantic differential to investigate how primary school teachers perceive the ITI model. The following conclusions emerged from their research: primary school teachers perceive Integrated Thematic Instruction positively, which was confirmed (for respondents familiar with ITI) in this study and preparing for lessons using the ITI model is challenging for teachers. The study results are also consistent with this statement, with 80% of respondents stating that they create their materials and the same percentage stating that they would like to increase the number of materials used for teaching purposes (Bortlíková & Válek, 2017).

Internationally, studies looking at the ITI model occur with greater frequency. Qualitative research designs are widespread (Syamsudin & Safitri, 2020), with a preponderance of case studies (Cook, 2004; O'Neal, 1998). However, many published studies (e.g. Ernawita & Rakimahwati, 2020; Wardani et al., 2020) combine ITI with other educational approaches, and therefore, the results of these studies are only partially applicable to the comparison of this cross-sectional study. Moreover, there is a deficiency of research studies oriented towards primary school

teachers. Only one cross-sectional study with a questionnaire was found (Rismiati, 2012), which addresses the issue of ITIs in primary school first-grade teachers. This study was conducted in Indonesia, where ITI has been part of the curriculum since 2005. Thus, ITI is taught nationally in schools and, therefore, universally by teachers. However, the data from the questionnaire survey (Rismiati, 2012) have only minimal intersection of the focus of the questionnaire items, making it difficult to compare them.

For a more successful implementation and application of ITI in the practice of primary schools, it would be advisable to increase the percentage of informed and adequately educated teachers, which could be achieved by reserving or expanding the time allocation for teaching Integrated Thematic Instruction at universities, creating ITI courses within the framework of further education of teaching staff and other educational activities (workshops, lectures at schools). It is also important to develop teaching materials that are accessible to teachers and usable in practice. Further research could be oriented towards groups of teachers that were not the focus of this research study, e.g. second-cycle primary school teachers or secondary school teachers. Given that there is a practical lack of results on research on the effectiveness of ITI in the Czech environment, the results of this study could be used to design an experimental study - in this respect; we recommend that a future study should reflect the application of ITI in the Czech environment, in terms of the frequency of intervention (e.g. weekly thematic blocks), the most frequent area of ITI application (natural science subject area), etc.

The strength of this study is the effort to collect data on a national scale (all primary schools in the Czech Republic were contacted) and to conduct a pilot phase in developing a research instrument for data collection. The limitation of this research study is mainly the use of a non-standardised questionnaire (due to the absence of standardised questionnaires in the Czech transcription on the topic) and its relatively lower return rate, which, however, is 10% and corresponds to the shared experience with the return rate of questionnaires in the implementation of similar studies. The success rate of completed questionnaires in this study is only 54%, so almost half of the respondents visited the website but did not complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, the results of this study may be biased by the uneven percentage of respondents across regions, age groups, and groups divided by length of experience or gender.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the Integrated Thematic Instruction model among Czech first-grade teachers is relatively low. Yet, this awareness influences the frequency of ITI use in pedagogical practice. The findings are positive for respondents who are familiar with the model and use it in practice - they use ITI with a high frequency, they use a wide range of topics that they apply to different areas and disciplines, and the vast majority feel sufficiently motivated to use the model. Practically, the findings of this study raise the need to inform and further educate teachers about ITI, including students in teacher-oriented degree programmes. Future research could be oriented towards other groups of teachers who might use ITI in their practice.

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