1. Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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Abstract

After defining *segregated-skill instruction* and *integrated-skill instruction*, this article explains how it is necessary to integrate the four skills in the English language classroom in order to create authentic communication. Content-based instruction and task-based instruction naturally lead to this integrated approach.

One of my favorite images for teaching ESL/EFL is that of a tapestry. The tapestry is woven from many strands such as the characteristics of the teacher (e.g. personality, teaching style, beliefs about language learning, and prior experience), the learner (e.g. personality, learning style, language learning beliefs, and prior experience), the setting (e.g. available resources, institutional values, and cultural background), and the relevant languages (e.g. ESL or EFL, as well as the native language of the learner and that of the teacher).

For the instructional loom to produce a large, strong, beautiful, colorful tapestry, the just-mentioned strands must be interwoven in positive ways. For instance, the instructor's teaching style must address the learning style of the learner, the learner must be motivated, and the setting must provide resources and values that strongly support the teaching of the language. However, if the strands are not woven together effectively, the instructional loom is likely to produce something small, weak, ragged, pale and not recognizable as a tapestry at all.

Besides the four strands mentioned above—teacher, learner, setting, and relevant languages—other important strands exist in the tapestry. In a practical sense, one of the most crucial of these strands consists of the four primary skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. The strand also includes associated or related skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning and usage. Optimal ESL communication is present when all the skills are interwoven during instruction.

The Idea of Language-as-Skills

Literacy—as well as language itself—is sometimes viewed as a set of skills. According to Barton (1994), the skill image is a well-known, school-based metaphor. In this metaphor, "these skills are ordered into a set of stages . . . and then taught in a particular order. . . . Literacy is seen as a psychological variable which can be measured and assessed. Skills are treated as things which people own or possess; some are transferable . . . , some are not. Learning to read becomes a technical problem, and the successful reader is a skilled reader. As a school-based definition of literacy, this view is very powerful, and it is one which spills over into the rest of society." (pp. 11-12)

Although I adopt some parts of the language-as-skills idea, I reject others. For instance, I agree that it is possible to assess the language skills (e.g. O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). However, I do not think that the language-as-skills concept necessarily implies that language skills are divisible into clearly defined stages that should be taught in a particular order. Likewise, I do not think that learning to read (or to use language in general) is merely a technical problem, nor that a skill is something that one "possesses" like a baseball glove or a TV. Instead, I view the main skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and the associated skills (syntax, vocabulary and so on) as overlapping areas of competence. The "skill strand" of the tapestry leads to optimal ESL communication when the skills are interwoven with each other during instruction. This is known as the integrated-skill approach.

If this kind of coordinated weaving does not occur, then the strand consists merely of discrete, segregated skills—parallel threads that do not touch, support, or interact with each other. This is sometimes known as the segregated-skill approach. Another title for this mode is the language-based approach, because the language itself is the focus (language for language's sake). In this approach, the emphasis is not on learning language for authentic communication.

By comparing *segregated-skill instruction* with *integrated-skill instruction*, we can see the advantages of integrating the skills and move toward improving our teaching for our English language learners.

Segregated-Skill Instruction

In the segregated-skill approach, the mastery of discrete language skills like reading or speaking is seen as the key to successful learning, and there is typically a separation of language learning from content learning (Mohan, 1986; Cantoni-Harvey, 1987). This situation contradicts the integrated way that people use language skills in normal communication, and it clashes with the direction in which language teaching experts have been moving in recent years.

Skill segregation is reflected in traditional ESL/EFL programs that isolate language skills for instructional purposes. These programs offer classes with titles such as "Intermediate Reading," "Basic Listening Comprehension," "Advanced Writing," "Grammar I and II," "Pronunciation," and so on. Why do ESL/EFL programs offer classes that segregate the language skills? For one thing, teachers and administrators might think it is logistically easier to present courses on writing divorced from speaking, or on listening severed from reading. For another thing, they may believe it is instructionally impossible to concentrate effectively on more than one skill at a time.

Even if it were possible effectively and fully to develop one or two skills in the absence of all the others (and this is a highly dubious undertaking), such an approach does not ensure adequate preparation for later success in academic communication, career-related language use, or "on-the-street" interaction in the language. An extreme example is the Grammar-Translation Method, which teaches students to analyze grammar and translate (usually in writing) from one language to another. This method restricts language learning to a very narrow, non-communicative range that does not prepare students to use the language for everyday life. Recently some ESL/EFL teaching candidates went to Venezuela for a required, six-week cultural and linguistic immersion experience. They visited universities and schools, where they found some English classes taught by the Grammar-Translation Method and others taught in a broadly communicative mode. The candidates' journals and final papers reflected their conviction that the Grammar-Translation Method, the ultimate in skill segregation, was highly limited in value for most of the Venezuelan students.

Frequently segregated-skill ESL/ EFL classes present instruction in terms of skill-linked learning strategies: reading strategies, listening strategies, speaking strategies, and writing strategies (for examples, see Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). *Learning strategies* are behaviors or thoughts that students employ, most often consciously, to improve their learning. Examples are guessing based on the context, breaking a sentence or word down into parts to understand the meaning, and practicing the language with someone else.

Very frequently, experts demonstrate strategies as though they were linked to only one particular skill such as reading or writing (e.g., Peregoy and Boyle, 2001; Tierney et al., 1999; Vacca and Vacca, 1993). However, it can be confusing or misleading to believe that a given strategy is associated with only one specific language skill. Many strategies, such as paying selective attention, self-evaluating, asking questions, analyzing, synthesizing, planning and predicting, are applicable across skill areas (see Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Oxford, 1990). Common strategies help weave the language skills together. Teaching students to improve their learning strategies in one skill area can often enhance performance in all language skills (Oxford, 1996).

In many instances, an ESL or EFL course is labeled by a single skill, but fortunately this segregation of language skills might be only partial or might even be illusory. If the teacher is creative, a course bearing a discrete-skill title might actually involve multiple, integrated skills. For instance, in a course on "Intermediate Reading" the teacher probably gives some or all of the directions orally in English, thus causing students to use their listening ability to understand the assignment. In this course students might discuss their readings, thus employing speaking and listening skills and certain associated skills such as pronunciation, syntax and social usage. Students might be asked to summarize or analyze readings in written form, thus activating their writing skill. In a real sense, then, some courses that are labeled according to one specific skill might actually reflect an integrated-skill approach after all.

The same can be said about ESL/EFL textbooks. For instance, a particular textbook series might highlight certain skills in one book or another, but all the language skills might nevertheless be present in the tasks in each book. In this way, students have the benefit of practicing all the language skills

in an integrated, natural, communicative way even if one skill is the main focus of a given volume.

In contrast to segregated-skill instruction, both actual and apparent, there are at least two forms of instruction that are clearly oriented toward integrating the skills.

Two Forms of Integrated-Skill Instruction

The two types of integrated-skill ESL/EFL teaching are content-based language instruction and task-based instruction. The first of these emphasizes learning content through language while the second stresses doing tasks that require communicative language use. Both of these benefit from a diverse range of materials, textbooks and technologies in the ESL or EFL classroom.

Content-Based Instruction

In content-based instruction, students practice all the language skills in a highly integrated, communicative fashion while learning content such as science, mathematics, and social studies (Crandall, 1987). Content-based language instruction is valuable at all levels of proficiency, but the nature of the content might differ by proficiency level. For beginners, the content often involves basic social and interpersonal communication skills, but past the beginning level, the content can become increasingly academic and complex. The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA, created by Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) shows how language learning strategies can be integrated into the simultaneous learning of content and language.

At least three general models of content-based language instruction exist: theme-based, adjunct, and sheltered (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). The theme-based model integrates the language skills into the study of a theme (for example, urban violence, cross-cultural differences in marriage practices, natural wonders of the world, or a broad topic such as "change"). The theme must be very interesting to students and must allow a wide variety of language skills to be practiced, always in the service of communicating about the theme. This is the most useful and widespread form of content-based instruction today, and it is found in many innovative ESL and EFL textbooks. In the adjunct model, language and content courses are taught separately but are carefully coordinated. In the

sheltered model, the subject matter is taught in simplified English tailored to students' ESL/EFL proficiency level.

Task-Based Instruction

Another mode of skill integration is task-based instruction in which students participate in communicative tasks in ESL or EFL. Tasks are defined as activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that require comprehending, producing, manipulating or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989).

The task-based model is beginning to influence the measurement of learning strategies, not just the teaching of ESL and EFL. As the author of the original "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" (or SILL, first published in Oxford, 1990), I am currently leading a research group in developing a "Task-Based SILL." This new questionnaire allows students to assess their own learning strategy use as related to specific language tasks.

In task-based instruction, basic pair work and group work are often used to increase student interaction and collaboration. For instance, students work together to write and edit a class newspaper, develop a television commercial, enact scenes from a play, or take part in other joint tasks. More structured cooperative learning formats can also be used in task-based instruction. Task-based instruction is relevant to all levels of language proficiency, but the nature of the tasks varies from one level to the other. Tasks become increasingly complex at higher proficiency levels. For instance, beginners might be asked to introduce each other and share one item of information about each other. More advanced students might do more intricate and demanding tasks such as taking a public opinion poll at school, the university, or a shopping mall.

I advocate a combination of task-based and theme-based instruction in which tasks are unified by coherent themes. This combination is becoming a trend in ESL/EFL instruction.

Advantages of the Integrated-Skill Approach

The integrated-skill approach, as contrasted with the purely segregated-skill approach, exposes ESL/EFL learners to authentic language and challenges them

to interact naturalistically in the language. In the integrated-skill approach, learners rapidly gain a true picture of the richness and complexity of the English language as employed for communication. Moreover, the approach stresses that English is not just an object of academic interest nor merely a key to passing an examination; instead, English becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people. This approach allows teachers to track students' progress in multiple skills at the same time. Integrating the language skills also promotes the learning of real content, not just the dissection of language forms. Finally, the integrated-skill approach (whether found in content-based or task-based language instruction or some hybrid form) can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds.

Integrating the Language Skills

In order to integrate the language skills in ESL/EFL instruction, teachers should consider taking these steps:

- Learn more about the various ways to integrate language skills in the classroom (e.g., content-based, task-based, or a combination).
- Reflect on their current approach and evaluate the extent to which the skills are integrated.
- Choose instructional materials, textbooks and technologies that promote the integration of listening, reading, speaking and writing as well as the associated skills of syntax, vocabulary and so on.
- Even if a given course is labeled according to just one skill, remember that it is possible to integrate the other language skills through appropriate tasks.
- Teach language learning strategies and emphasize that a given strategy can often enhance performance in multiple skills.

With careful reflection and planning, any teacher can integrate the language skills and strengthen the tapestry of language teaching and learning. When the tapestry is woven well, learners can use English effectively for communication.

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