

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATED SKILLS IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract

The integrated-skills are important and necessary that based on listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which has become a new trend in EFL contexts because it is believed an effective approach to develop students' communicative competence and the ability to use English to gain access to social, vocational, educational, or professional opportunities. Various from the traditional segregated language skills approach which presented a language skill in isolation from the others, the integrated-skills approach presents all language skills in conjunction with each other so that the learners do not only knows the language they are learning but also are able to use it natural communication. This article is intended to inform current studies and ideas related to integrated skills approach in order to provide a more vivid understanding of its implementation in EFL contexts.

**Key words:** Integrated skills, Segregated skills, advantages of integrated skills, techniques.

### INTRODUCTION

The use of English as the major lingua franca and as the main medium for worldwide dissemination of information and knowledge has made communicative competence and the ability to use English to gain access to social, vocational, educational, or professional opportunities the most essential objectives of English learning (Celce-Murcia, 2001). In relation to this, Davies and Pearse (2000, p. 99) accentuated that "Real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom." To achieve these objectives, the integrative language skills instruction seems to be the most effective to use because it seeks to teach language as a means of communication to serve the purpose it was originally created for, which can be motivating and realistic as well (Brown, 2001; Tsung-Yuan & Oxford, 2002). Hinkel (2010) accentuated that the current integrated language skills teaching models aim at developing learners' fluency and accuracy, as well as their socio-cultural communicative competence. To attain these, adapting the language from context to context and from genre to genre are required.

Despite the great potential and effectiveness of the integrative skills approach

many teachers, especially in EFL contexts still implement the segregated skills teaching by presenting one skill separately from the others. In many EFL programs, courses on speaking are isolated from writing or listening learning activities are divorced from reading. According to Oxford (2001), the segregation of language skills is indicated through the titles of the classes offered, such as "Basic Listening Comprehension," "Intermediate Reading," "Grammar I and II", "Advanced Writing", and so on.

The main reason for the skills segregation is the belief that teaching is much easier if syllabuses are organized around one skill than focused on some at one time. According to the teachers presenting one skill discretely from the others, focusing on more than one skill at a time can be instructional impossible (Oxford, 2001). These teachers might have been influenced by the notion that teaching language skills separately would make the learners an 'accurate' user of language (Klimova, 2014, p.88) because the approach allows learners to gain complete command over one particular language skill as the focus was given on one particular skill at a time (Jing, 2006). Such a practice can be a drawback because, unlike the integrated skills approach, it cannot lead to optimal learning process and outcome. Tajzad and Namaghi, (2014) found that although segregated skills teaching may help students develop their knowledge of the language, but it does not enable them to use the knowledge in actual communication. In line with this, Oxford (2001) concluded that although it is possible to teach one or two skills in absence of the others in the classrooms, discrete skill approach would fail to prepare the learners for academic, job oriented or, everyday communication.

Various current studies (Sanchez, 2000; Bose, 2003; Faydi, 2003; Dawid, 2004; Askildson, 2008; Akram & Malik, 2010; Mitrofanova & Chemezov, 2011) have revealed that skills integration of supports both learners and teachers because it inspires teachers to vary the learning activities, helps learners to use the language they learn freely, vividly and naturally, improves students' ability to express themselves and take greater risks in using the language, and effectively increases learning outcomes. Therefore, to enable the EFL students to develop their knowledge of English and their competence to use it in real communication, implementing the integrative skills approach is unavoidable. Raimes (1983) argued that to make language learning classes as close as possible to real-life communicative situations, activities that let students use all the language skills must be organized.

### **MAIN PART**

This article reviews current studies on integrated language skills teaching approach in order to provide a more vivid understanding of its nature, types, and techniques. The discussion begins with a brief review of the differences between segregated and integrated language skills teaching. It is followed by a brief exposition

of the advantages of integrated skills teaching implementation in EFL classroom and the discussion about the two major integrated skills teaching types and teaching techniques. Before ending this article with some conclusions, the factors that could impede integrated language skills teaching and a summary of the results of current studies on integrated language skills teaching implementation in EFL contexts are presented.

As we come to the Nature of Language Skills, there are four basic skills. The four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are the mode or manner in which language is used for communication (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Anytime a person communicates using a language, he employs the combination of these skills. While communicating through the oral language he receives the messages by listening and responds by speaking. In written language, he receives the messages by reading and responds by writing. In short, depending on the channel of communication, a person listens, speaks, reads and writes. Thus, language skills are a means of communication. By means of listening and reading, a person gets information as the input of language, and by employing speaking and writing he makes language output based on the language inputs.

### **Segregated vs Integrated Language Skills**

Up to the end of the 1970s, the four language skills were taught in isolation. This was due to the predominance of the traditional language teaching methods including the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Structuralism Approach, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach. During the domination of GTM up to the beginning of the 20th century, for instance, learning activities were focused on analyzing the English grammatical rules and translating literary texts from English the students' native language. Therefore, students were not prepared to use the language as a means of communication in everyday life. To take another example, under the Structuralism Approach, which views language as a complex system of interrelated parts, language teaching was aimed to help the students master the language elements and learn the rules regulating how these elements were combined, like using phonemes to form morpheme or using words to create phrases and sentences" (Usho-Juan & Martinez-Flor, p.5). As a consequence, the students knew what the elements and rules of the language but could not use them to communicate.

Additionally, the underlying belief of Audiolingualism which was very popular in the 1940s to 1960s, that language is basically oral and thus language learning should be focused on speaking caused language skills treated separately. Under this method the students managed to know the language skills but were unable to communicate their thoughts by means of the language. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) accentuated that in the purest form of segregation, the language was taught as an end in itself rather than

a means to an end, i.e., the authentic interaction and communication. This is confirmed by Tajzad and Namaghi's (2014) observation revealing that Iranian EFL learners actually had an acceptable knowledge of language components such as grammar, vocabulary and the like but could rarely use them to communicate in English because class time was devoted to learning grammar, vocabulary and the isolated reading skill and rarely provided chance to use language skills in an integrated fashion.

The discrete skill approach was based on the belief that a separate focus on individual skills accelerates students' language learning (Jing, 2006). Therefore, in that approach, the four language skills are taught separately, and materials and activities were designed usually focusing on only one specific skill where other skills were ignored. In relation to this, the discrete skill approach came to be known as "language-based approach" (Oxford, 2001), where the language itself is the focus of instruction and learning for authentic communication has no importance (Jing, 2006).

The integrated skills approach emphasizes that interaction is both the means and the essential goal of language learning. Therefore, learning activities should be directed to enable the students to communicate the message in terms of its meaning, instead of concentrating exclusively on grammatical perfection or phonetics. In relation to this, the students' mastery of the language they are learning is evaluated in terms of how much they have developed their communicative abilities and competencies. To enable the students to develop their communicative abilities and competencies, the language components and skills must not be separated. Hinkel (2010) accentuated that a language may need to be broken into parts to study it. However, to use the language, we need to integrate the skills and components. In line with this, Harmer (2007) accentuated that both of the receptive skills and the productive skills are two sides of the same coin. They cannot be separated because one skill can reinforce another in various ways.

### **Advantages of Integrated Skills Teaching**

The implementation of an integrated skills approach offers some advantages. Carols (1990, pp. 73-74) described five advantages. The first, skills integration provides continuity in teaching-learning/program because in this approach tasks are closely related to each other. The second, activities in the integrated skills approach can be designed to provide input before output. The third, it provides realistic learning as skills integration allows for the development of four skills within a realistic communicative framework. The fourth, it provides chances to know and redeploy the language learned by students in different contexts and modes and it can be valuable for motivation because it allows for the recycling and revision of language which has already been taught. Fifth, skills integration increases confidence to a weaker or less confident learner.

Based on his literature review, Kebede (2013) listed seven advantages of integrated skills teaching. First, language skills integration provides more purposeful and meaningful learning at all proficiency levels. Second, it contributes to consistent teaching and to better communication. Third, it brings variety into the classroom, which enables teachers to enrich classroom instruction by integrating language skills cooperatively. Fourth, it makes language learning comes nearer to the way we do in real life. The language skills integration enables students to learn to manage the language and to easily transfer the acquired knowledge of the other areas. Thus, it promotes language learning and affects the new language knowledge of learners positively. Fifth, language skills integration helps students develop their communicative competence (grammatical/linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence). Sixth, it provides exposure to authentic language learning environment so that students can interact naturally with the intended language. Seventh, it assists students to develop their critical thinking so that they can analyze, synthesize and evaluate information better. This enables them to learn language skills in a better way and be successful academically. Seventh, it creates motivation in students by avoiding a routine practice of forms of the language that often creates dullness in students. Eighth, it provides student-centered and humanistic approach to language teaching in a classroom.

### **Techniques for Integrating Language Skills**

In integrated language skills teaching/learning process, the contents/task, and activities should be sequenced in a logical progression, by placing the easier aspects at the beginning, which are then followed by more difficult ones. In the process, the language skills should be sequenced and unified within a framework of a lesson or sequence of lessons (Atkins et al., 1996). The skills integration to the topic or task in the lesson unit(s) could be done in various ways, but the most common and convenient way is using the pattern that sequences them from receptive—listening and reading—to productive skills—writing and speaking (McDonough & Show, 2003). Cohen (1990) and Burgess (1994) posited that the best model for integrating

language skills are where the practice of receptive skills of listening and reading leads into the practice of the productive ones of speaking and writing. Such integration can be realized by exposing the learners with a body of information from enjoyable authentic texts, videos, music, magazines they read, watch, or listen to and later asking them to reproduce at least some of its content in spoken and or written language. This model is supported by the theory stating "input-interaction-output" as the three essential composing elements in language learning or acquisition. Language learning takes place when the students get "input"—the language data exposed to the learners through listening or reading. After receiving the input, the students will make interaction exchanges of ideas taking place because the students have not entirely

understood the input (text, utterance, and expression) so that they interrupt, ask questions or make a discussion. During or after the interaction, output the language a learner produces will emerge. Output (spoken or written) can emerge during the interaction because while asking and answering a question, the students produce language. Output can also emerge after the interaction, if, for instance, the students are given an assignment.

Besides the receptive-productive skills sequence model above, language skills lesson(s) could also be integrated using the productive-receptive pattern. For instance, in pre-reading and pre-listening activities, students can start with a discussion/speaking and then move on to reading or listening (Atkins et al., 1996). Which of these two patterns to choose in designing a lesson? It depends on the view taken of the best ordering of the skills, the relative importance of the language skills, the level of students (Davies & Pearse, 2002).

### **CONCLUSION**

Communicative competence and the ability to use English to gain access to social, vocational, educational, or professional opportunities has been the most essential objectives of English learning due to the use of English as the major lingua franca and the main medium disseminating information and knowledge worldwide. To achieve the goal in EFL contexts, implementing integrated language skills instruction seems to be the best option. Different from the traditional segregated language skills approach which presented a language skill in isolation from the others skills, integrated language skills present all language skills in conjunction with each other so that the learners do not only knows the language they are learning but also are able to use it natural communication.

Current studies revealed that, if integrated skills' teaching is implemented well, it is not only effective in improving students' language skills and/or language components but also supports the students and teachers as well. However, to run an English program employing the integrated language skills teaching approach, it is necessary that the teachers have both competence and belief that the approach can really work effectively. Compared to teaching using the traditional segregated approach, the integrated skills approach requires a good understanding of discourse, the skills of using textbook flexibly and readiness to implement the student-centered learning approach. The institution should also provide full supports in terms of policy, infrastructures and learning materials and tools. In addition, the students should also realize the objective and importance of the integrated skills implementation so that they are committed to succeed the program.

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