Skill-integration: An effective model
of learning a FL

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Abstract:

In this paper I will consider the issue of skill-integration within a communicative model of teaching at the tertiary level. First, I shall state some disadvantages of the mono-skill model of learning. Then, I shall review some advantages of the skill-integration model.

An attempt will, then, be made at integrating the two skills of listening and reading through a discourse-processing model of analysis.

The purpose of such a model of analysis is to prepare students at this level of study to process spoken and written discourse in order to develop co-operatively their receptive skills. They will, thus, be guided towards using the linguistic and non-linguistic elements to deal understandably with what they listen to and read.

Lying at the heart of discourse processing is the notion of interpreting, common to both skills. As a process it refers to giving linguistic items their appropriate contextual values. Put another way it consists in reconciling usage and use.

It is believed that the need for a skill integration strategy based on these principles will yield a beneficial learning crop.

1-Introduction

The adoption of the communicative approach has had substantial implications for language teaching. A number of suggestions have been made over recent years as to procedures to help FL learners at different courses of study to cope with the new findings (Canale and Swain 1980, Widdowson 1978, 1979, 1983).

Communicative ability has become a well-established goal in FL teaching business. The term encompasses the knowledge of the system and the ability to use it (Widdowson 1979) in its receptive or productive modes. Thus, for learners to be communicatively competent involves being able to use a FL effectively in a variety of situations. This competence should embrace among its components receptive as well as productive skills.

In contrast with previous approaches (mainly structuralism) (Rivers and Temperly 1978), the communicative approach seeks to handle pairs or groups of skills in such a way that each of these enhances, reinforces and enriches the effectiveness of learning another skill (or other skills) and of the process of learning as a whole.

2-Skill integration
2-1 Overview: some disadvantages of mono-skill model of learning

It is a conventional practice to represent the four skills as isolated language abilities a foreign learner has to master. Skills are usually perceived of in terms of formal value, phonological, grammatical and lexical. That is to say they serve to practise the sound and/or formal patterns of language. Activities aim at drilling learners on isolated instances of usage. In general, the belief appears to be that by getting learners to practise intensively in one skill, their language awareness will be raised. This is no wonder since the aim behind learning language was item-based.

Further, the nature of the conventional norm tends to segregate language skills rather than integrate them. The adherence to this norm has made many believe that focusing on a single skill, even for a given time, will make it possible to develop learners' language awareness.

Not only does the norm tend to discrete-point language components, but it seems also to be time consuming. That is, allotting

sufficient time for each skill to be *mastered* will not take a short time. It is doubtful that learners will be fully aware of what they have practised by the time they get a satisfactory mastery of one skill.

In the case of the two skills of listening and reading the bias is towards formal segmentation. Listening has been considered, alongside reading, as a passive skill whereby learners are being bombarded with embarrassment of usage riches without there being activities that engage learners *cognitively* and *communicatively* in the process of learning.

Usually students tend to treat language they listen to or read in isolation and do not see to it as a coherent piece of discourse.

Activities being spent overwhelmingly on one skill may be rather restricting learners' perspectives and impoverishing their potential in dealing with the multi-mode nature of language. The point is that whenever stress is laid upon a single skill, bias will grow against other skills. The model seems to achieve a little of communicative worth if at all.

The mono-skill learning/teaching model has also other drawbacks on learners' autonomy, a process that thrives on learners being fully engaged in the process of learning. By keeping learners under the mechanical and meaningless drilling on one skill, they will see their initiative and creativity being cut down. This keeps learners far from building confidence in learning.

2-2 Some advantages of skill integration

Given the above shortcomings attendant upon the mono-skill learning/teaching model, it seems legitimate to argue in favour of a process whereby two or more skills are integrated.
Read (1984:73) states the following advantages in using an integrated-skill approach. at a beginner level.

1-*Reinforcement*: one skill reinforces another.
2-*Variety*: combining the use of skills increases interest and motivation, and precludes boredom
3-*Enhancement*: one skill being an input to another.
4-*Communicative awareness*: it raises learners' sensitiveness as to communication strategies.

5- *Appropriate use of language*: varying contexts in the teaching of various skills will help learners manage more different uses of language.

6- *Recycling*: one skill is used to recycle another either to reinforce it or to remedy some gaps in another.

7- *Co-operation*: it creates co-operation among learners by allowing low-achievers to learn from high-achievers.

8- *Overall language performance*: all skills develop in parallel to allow learners to have a balanced performance.

The above stated points can be held to be relevant to learners at upper levels as is the case with the present study.

Cunningsworth (1984) puts it clearly that

'Being able to communicate effectively in English means being proficient in the various language skills involved in the communication process, but it means more than being able to perform in each of the four skills separately. It also means being able to use the skills effectively in various combinations depending on the nature of the interaction'. (Cunningsworth 1984: 43)

So, instead of bombarding learners with batteries of mechanical drills in one skill, it seems much more rewarding to situate skill teaching in a broader communicative context where priority is given to enabling learners to use the skills in communicating. The question, then, is not how much skill tuition is put over to learners but rather *how successful they are taught the effective use of skills in a context of social interaction.*

Thus, instead of using one skill as the initial and once-for-all determiner of learners' performance and to maintain a great deal of cross-fertilization among skills, the use of skills should evolve simultaneously with each being able to reinforce, enhance and supplement another (or others).

Communication is a process that involves proficiency in various language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In a teaching situation where these four skills are combined and used co-operatively, students are brought gradually to a point where they can use English effectively. Classroom practice should work towards this end.

Read (1984) points out that the skill-integration model of teaching consists in allowing learners to do activities by combining two or more of the four skills. The integration of skills, then, calls for an approach which brings two or more of the four language skills into co-operation. Co-operation implies influence among skills.

This co-operation is particularly called for in a CLT context where language activities are directed at developing students' communicative use whether in its productive or receptive mode.. The process calls for an interactive methodology whereby awareness as to the appropriate use of skills is highly raised.

3-An outlook

Within a CLT model, skill teaching should be geared to the nature of the learning as a process and to learners' needs. It should aim at making learners aware of the process and strategies they employ in processing language as a communicative tool. A listening / reading lesson should aim at building up learners' ability to engage in a purposeful listening/reading process and to adopt strategies to interact appropriately with the piece of discourse under scrutiny. This involves their linguistic as well as world knowledge. To do this, they will apply what they know to what they listen to and read, *viz* what they bring to the text with what the writer puts into it.

Listening and reading are much more than just passive comprehension. They both involve two processes of *interpreting* and *evaluating* the intentions of speakers and writers. In working out these intentions listeners and readers engage in a process of *meaning negotiation* whereby they draw upon rules of usage (the grammar of the language) and rules of use (socio-cultural conventions) for the purpose of linking utterances to intentions.

Lying, then, at the heart of both skills is the process of interpreting whereby learners are enabled to process language as communication (Widdowson 1978). This process is activated when learners are encouraged to *participate actively in understanding* the linguistic and the non-linguistic meaning within discourse. Harmer (2001:199) holds that

> 'Understanding a piece of discourse involves much more than just knowing the language. In order to make sense of any text we need to

have 'pre-existent knowledge of the world' (schemata). These are mental representations of typical situations we come across. When we are stimulated by particular words, discourse patterns, or contexts, such schematic knowledge is activated and we are able to recognize what we see or hear because it fits into patterns that we already know.'

Such issues are of much more importance when it is a matter of learning/teaching a foreign language because learners have usually different *systemic* and *schematic* knowledge (Widdowson 1983)

On these very premises and with well-defined purposes borne in mind, students at the tirtiary level should be trained to adopt two main strategies when listening or reading a given piece of discourse. First, they are to explore the formal clues, cohesive devices that actualize meanings intended by speakers and writers (bottom-up processing). Second, they are to rely on common knowledge they share with their addressers to arrive at the most appropriate interpretation (top-down processing). Either route can be chosen provided it leads to discourse exploration. To this end, students should be presented with materials consisting of a variety of texts offering them a wide spectrum through which they will develop their interpretive strategies. They should be encouraged to make use of strategies such as *skimming*, *scanning*, *guessing*, *predicting* and *using internal and external clues* to derive meanings from a listening or reading text.

The procedure may work as follows. A piece of discourse is selected for listening in accordance with students' level of instruction, interest, etc. To begin with, a purpose of the listening segment should be set clearly. Then, students are to be primed to the context and topic of the listening passage through elicitation questions. This may consist of activating their background knowledge relevant to the topic in hand and using some language familiar to students. This step-by-step 'tuning' will lead to students *predicting* the content of the text and forming some *expectations* about the whole piece of discourse. At a later stage, students will confirm these expectations depending on the task they are set to. Usually, they are asked to do either of two things. They may be asked to listen to get the gist of the content of the passage and this is called 'extensive listening' or to get specific information from the passage and this is called 'intensive listening'

(Harmer 2001). A number of currently practised activities can be chosen for this purpose. All I suggest here is to extend these activities as to include what might be called *interpreting strategies*.

Now the point about questions is whether they appeal to usage or use. In the first case, questions will make a formal demand on students by requiring them to supply answers from the formal stock of knowledge (words and sentences); whereas in the second case, questions relate to the value these items take on within the piece of discourse under study. The answers to these questions will make a rather contextual demand on students. Use related questions would consist, for example, in encouraging students to activate their inferring process. Copying what is explicitly expressed in sentences is not sufficient, in this regard. Students should go through the meanings of propositions to infer the illocutionary meanings. This is part of the interaction process between the listener (or the reader) and the speaker (or the writer) through the input discourse. Students are asked thereby to reconstruct the whole discourse from meanings the have worked out.

Once students' comprehension is judged (by the teacher) to be sufficient, urging students to see to the text, as a piece of reading is a step further in the whole comprehension process. For all that they know about the piece of discourse, students at this stage should continue being actively involved in the process of exploration. Once the listening phase has been dealt with *properly* and the purpose being set has been attained, there comes the reading phase at a post-listening stage. Two main objectives may be assigned to the reading portion. It may provide a feedback on what students have listened to, i.e. the extent to which they have understood. It may also be exploited as a piece of reading. In the latter case, the teacher would opt for summarizing as a technique to understand more the passage. Using the same spectrum of strategies used along the listening process, students will continue dealing with the text heuristically to get the gist of its content.

The process of integration would continue as far as integrating other skills (speaking and writing) through other specially devised tasks and activities.

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Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a skill integration model and made it the point that in order to see a return on one's learning, students should not be enslaved to a mono-skill model of mechanical, meaningless language manipulation tasks that may lead to reducing the likelihood of their growth in the other skills and in the communicative process as a whole. A maximum of variety is to be sought to lubricate the wheels of well-spiced effective learning.

To this end, teaching methodology should cease to teach skills as discrete parts of language. For reasons set before, a FL student needs to be taught the four skills co-operatively in a context of communicative interaction in order for him/her to be an efficient actor in the communicative process.

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