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*The importance of integrated skills approach in English as a foreign
language learners classrooms*

Abstract *The article under discussion describes integration of the language skills into the teaching process of the English language. The authors of the article consider that Integrated Skills focuses on the four main English skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening through a "Communicative Language Teaching" methodology. Integration of the four skills is concerned with realistic communication, exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language. 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. The integrated-skills approach, which incorporates listening, speaking, reading, and writing, has become a new trend in EFL contexts as 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 reviews current studies and ideas related to integrated skills approach in order to provide a more clear understanding of its implementation in EFL contexts.*

Keywords: *integrated-skills approach, content-based language teaching, task-based language teaching, EFL.*

INTRODUCTION

In general, integration is defined as the process of combining two or more things into one. Within education, integrated lessons take on a similar meaning in that they combine two or more concepts into one lesson. These integrated units involve many different concepts across all major subject areas. Integrated Skills focuses on the four main English skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening through a "Communicative Language

Teaching" methodology. New grammar patterns are learned in the context of a conversation or a real-life situation. Students will engage in various activities to practice English including listening tasks, role playing, and stimulating discussions. Perhaps teachers and administrators think it is logistically easier to present courses on writing divorced from speaking, or on listening isolated from reading. They may believe that it is instructionally impossible to concentrate on more than one skill at a time. 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) 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.

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.

Up to the end of the 1970s, the four language skills were taught in isolation. This was due to the predomination 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". 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 use of discrete skills approach in ESL/EFL classroom was challenged by the emergence of the communicative language teaching (CLT) at the end of the 1970s. The first advocate of language skills integration was Widdowson (1978) who pointed out that language uses take place in the form of discourse and in specific social contexts, not in discrete "units". Other linguists (Corder, 1978; Stern, 1993) supported the idea by emphasizing that the teaching of language skills cannot be conducted through separate and discrete structural elements. Thus, to be a competent language user, the learners should develop

receptive and productive skills in both spoken and written discourse. In other words, the four language skills should be learned interactively.

Based on these definitions, it is obvious that the philosophical basis of integrative skills approach is the concept based on the fact that in everyday life communication the four language skills are used together. Using a single skill is very rare because anytime people engage in a conversation, to interact with the person they are talking to, they are listening as well as speaking. Herson (1998: 22) pointed out that in daily life the four language skills “are seen in integration ... So, in the classroom, the activities should be taught in integration in order to arrive at ease in communication. 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. Integrated Language Skills Teaching Types

Integrated language skills teaching is differentiated into two types: content-based language teaching and task-based language teaching. However, a hybrid of the two types is possible to use as an alternative. In content-based language teaching, students practice language skills while engaging with activities focusing on a specific subject. In task-based language teaching, students are involved in activities that require comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally oriented to meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). The students work together to solve a problem, complete a task, create a product and etc. Therefore, learning takes places through social activity. Structured cooperative learning techniques are often employed in task-based teaching.

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 presents all language skills in conjunction with each other so that the learners do not only know the language they are learning but also are able to use it in 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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