

SKILLS TEACHING IN ESL CLASSROOM: DISCRETE VS. INTEGRATED

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ABSTRACT: *This paper reviews skills teaching in ESL classroom which can be discrete or integrated. It includes a brief history of discrete skills teaching according to different methods of English language teaching, and the shift towards integrated approach in more recent years. The researcher also analyses the classroom implications of discrete and integrated skills teaching in order to find out which one is more successful in ESL classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this article is firstly, to evaluate the methodological approaches towards skills teaching; secondly, to explore discrete skills approach in class; thirdly, to analyse integration of skills to make a learner a competent user of language; and finally, to propose the various ways of integration and recommend the teachers for the successful development of the integration of language skills.*

KEYWORDS: Skills, Teaching in ESL, Classroom, Discrete, Integrated

INTRODUCTION

English language learning can be defined as mastery over the four skills of English and being able to use these skills following strategies in a context. Therefore, an ESL class focused on building learners' proficiency over language skills. Teachers and researchers alike have always been interested in categorising the language skills and sub-skills in class. Also, they are well aware that a competent language user knows how to integrate the language skills when the situation demands. By taking a look at the classroom implications of discrete and integrated skills teaching researchers and teacher can develop a more informed approach towards teaching language skills in class. This paper focuses on the theoretical background, research studies, and practical application of discrete and integrated skills in ESL classroom.

Definition

According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), language skills or skills (in language teaching) is the mode or manner in which language is used. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are generally called the four language skills. Sometimes speaking and writing are called the active/productive skills and reading and listening, the passive/receptive skills (p. 293). They distinguished integrated skills approach saying, "integrated approach (in language teaching) is the teaching of the language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in conjunction with each other, as when a lesson involves activities that relate listening and speaking to reading and writing" (2002, p.262). On the other hand, discrete skills approach includes teaching the language skills separately. Mohan (1986) explains that, in segregated skills approach, the mastery of discrete skills, such as reading and

writing or reading and speaking are considered as the key to successful language learning and language learning is typically separated from content learning (as cited in Oxford, 2001).

Here, Rebecca Oxford (2001) illustrated that, English language teaching as a second or foreign language can be viewed as a tapestry, where the four primary skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) are the strands that need to be interwoven in positive ways to produce a large, strong, beautiful, colorful tapestry. This is known as the integrated-skill approach. In case of segregated-skill approach, “the strand consists merely of discrete, segregated skills—parallel threads that do not touch, support, or interact with each other” (Oxford, 2001, para. 3).

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

According to the type of the communicative process language skills can be Receptive (Listening and Reading) and Productive (Speaking and Writing). Moreover, they are divided into spoken and written based on the form of the communicative process (Klimova, 2014, p.87). In the early years, four language skills were taught separately, and materials and activities were designed usually focusing on only one specific skill where other skills were ignored. It was believed that a separate focus on individual skills accelerates students’ language learning (Jing, 2006). As a result, discrete-skill approach came to be known as “language-based approach” (Oxford, 2001, para. 3), where the language itself is the focus of instruction and learning for authentic communication has no importance (Jing, 2006).

In traditional ESL/EFL programs, classes focused on segregated language skills presenting courses on writing divorced from speaking, or on listening isolated from reading; possibly because teachers and administrators viewed that it to be logistically easy. Also, according to them focusing on more than one skill at a time can be instructionally impossible (Oxford, 2001). She mentions that, in Grammar Translation Method, the focus is strictly on “grammatical competence” (Sanchez, 2000, p.22); and translation from one language to another focusing on reading and writing skills, which does not teaches the learners the use of language for real-life communication (2001). In contrast, Audio Lingual Method gave utmost importance to speaking skills in language-teaching program following the principles of structural linguistics in addition with the behaviorist learning theories. Similar structure-based teaching and learning of listening skills was given importance to converse in the language (Hinkel, 2010). This method viewed that language is aural-oral, and thus it appeared reasonable to separate four skills (Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014, p.92). Thus, a model for language courses and material was created based on the structural separation of second language skills and the primacy of speaking skill (Hinkel, 2010). On the other hand, the Formalists focused on reading and accurate writing skills (Sanchez, 2000, p.28). As Situational Approach emerged in Britain, the classroom teaching technique called PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) grew popular. This model views that learners can use the language skills on their own in real-life situation, if they are guided through the controlled practice of each of the language skills in class (Hinkel, 2010).

Researchers believed that, teaching language skills discretely 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). Also, it was believed that this approach would make the learners an ‘accurate’ user

of language (Klimova, 2014, p.88). However, it was found that, despite knowing isolated skills, the learners were not able to communicate themselves in English as they lacked communicative competence (Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014, p.92). Therefore, they came to the conclusion that, although it is possible to teach one or two skills in absence of the others in courses, segregated-skill approach would fail to prepare the learners for academic, job oriented or, everyday communication (Oxford, 2001).

The introduction of the concept of "Communicative Competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980) brought about a change in the perspectives on how language skills were to be taught and used for communication inside and outside of the classroom (Hinkel, 2010). Harmer (2007) voices a similar view stating that, productive skills (writing and speaking) and receptive skills (reading and listening) are two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated by reason of the fact that one skill can reinforce another in a number of ways. Hinkel (2010) explains that, communicative approach toward language teaching resulted in the integration of the four macro-skills and their components, which can complement each other. In this case, skills are integrated in a way that people use language skills in normal communication (Oxford, 2001). Tajzad & Namaghi (2014) believes that, in order to study a language, one may need to learn the language skills separately; but the skills and components must be integrated if one intent to use the language (p.93).

Klimova (2014) proposed that, the four skills are both the goals and the means for communication (p.87). Through skills integration the learners to use authentic language and use it for real-life interaction. Also, learners' progress in multiple skills following this approach (Oxford, 2001). Moreover, the language meaning rather than the grammatical items and forms of language is promoted which gives the learners the potential to learn functional features of language (Klimova, 2014, p.87). Here, learning to communicate gets priority over merely passing an academic examination, and it can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds (Oxford, 2001). In practice, language skills are rarely used in isolation; e.g. a conversation needs both speaking and listening comprehension. Also, reading, listening and taking notes (writing) is likely to be almost as common as having a conversation in some contexts. (Baturay & Akar, n.d., p.18; Hinkel, 2010; Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014, p.92). Also, integration of skills is vital for learners with varying learning styles as extrovert learners can practice speaking, introverts learners can listen or read, and analytical or visual learners can see written sentences being constructed (Jing, 2006). This as a result produces optimal ESL/EFL communication when the skills are interwoven during instruction (Oxford, 2001). Tajzad & Namaghi (2014) feels that, skills should be integrated from the day one to make the learners competent language users (p.92).

In recent years, skills are integrated notably in Content Based Language Teaching and Task Based Language Teaching. According to Stoller (2002), in case of Content Based Language Teaching, students learn all the language skills in an integrated manner through learning other subjects i.e. science, mathematics, or social studies. Here, the content varies depending on the proficiency level of the learners. Oxford (2001) explains that, language learning strategies are integrated with learning of content and language. Here, the skills are incorporated with the content following 3 models; Theme Based model, Adjunct Model, and Sheltered Model. Oxford (2001) elaborates that, in the theme based model language skills are integrated with a theme such as, Globalisation, Urban poverty etc. The adjunct model carefully co-ordinates language and content, whereas the sheltered model, simplifies the language of the subject matter according to the students' language proficiency

level. On the other hand, Hinkel (2010) marks that, in the regions where English is taught as a foreign language the opportunities for meaningful communication outside the language classroom are limited which resulted in a great need for integrated communicative activities which led to the evolution of Task Based Language Teaching. In Task Based Language Teaching, students interact and collaborate through group or pair work to complete a specific task which ensures use of language in an integrated manner (Oxford, 2001). Zúñiga (2016) also mentions that, “TBLT promotes and stimulates the integration of skills through completing daily-life activities that improve students’ communicative competence because it offers learners the possibility of practicing the target language constantly” (p.14). Here, the activities can be diverse; i.e. “simulated conversations in pairs and small groups, storytelling, picture description, reproducing any incident” (Akram & Malik, 2010). Nunan (2004) affirms that “tasks aim at providing occasions for learners to experiment and explore both spoken and written language through learning tasks that are designed to engage students in the authentic, practical, and functional use of language” (p. 41). Klimova (2014) views that, TBLT-“enables pupils to solve real-world issues” (p.89). It is so far considered to be the closest classroom simulation of real-life interaction which made it the most widely adopted model of integrated language teaching (Hinkel, 2010).

DISCUSSION

Research on integrated and segregated approaches towards skills teaching in ESL classrooms has given some interesting insights. Discrete teaching of skills can be beneficial in certain classroom contexts. In case of discrete teaching of skills the learners have the opportunity to learn the skills thoroughly in an isolated manner. Here, they progress in each skill individually. This is supported by Hinkel (2010) as he points out that, teaching discrete language skills on class allows more focused teaching and more intensive learning. In some cases, using multiple skills at a time can be confusing for the learners; especially if they lack somewhat proficiency on the language skills. The learner will struggle a lot if they are face with complex task including a lot of skills which may demotivate them. Researchers have suggested that, integrated skills teaching can be complex as the tasks or activities integrate multiple language skills and learners use multiple communicative process at the same time, i.e. both receptive and productive skills, and put greater demands on both the instructor and the learners (Jing, 2006; Hinkel, 2010; Klimova, 2014, p.87). Teachers have to work hard to find or design materials appropriate for integration of skills in class as well as plan the tasks and activities in a way that balance all four skills for authentic use. Therefore, Akram & Malik (2010) states that, integration is demanding much of the time and patience of teachers. Moreover, it can lead the learners to avoid some of the skills or sub-skills as they feel over-challenged by them. Again Hinkel (2010) points out that, a particular language skill or set of skills to receive less attention than learners’ proficiencies might require if integration is too complex in class. Sometimes, teachers tend to overlook inaccurate languages used by the learners for sake of language fluency in integrated tasks. As a results, learners fail to receive genuine feedback from the teacher and continues to make those mistakes which are hard to unlearn later. Here, Richards (2005) explains that, “teaching of grammar and vocabulary, as well as accuracy in learner language production, may receive less emphasis” in integrated skills class room setting, as a result learners’ productive language lacked accuracy and sociocultural appropriateness (as cited in Hinkel, 2010). Some culture may reject integrated skills approach as they feel comfortable teaching skills discretely. Teachers need to be sensitive about a certain culture’s views. According to Richards &

Rodgers (2001), teachers and learners resist skill integration in various regions and cultures where the instruction in discrete language skills is valued more (as cited in Hinkel, 2010). Finally, in a large classroom lacking proper teaching aids teacher will struggle a lot to implement skills integration approach successfully in a short amount of time. Thus, limited time and large class size negatively affects the integrative teaching (Akram & Malik, 2010; Hinkel, 2010).

Although in discrete skills approach, skills are taught separately, in class integration of multiple skills occur naturally. As we integrate skills when we use language in real life, it is unrealistic and impossible to use only one skills solely in class. For instance, Oxford (2001) explains that, in a reading skill oriented class, students need listening skill to comprehend teacher's instruction, speaking skill for discussing the reading text, thus integrating listening, speaking and reading skill naturally in class. Similarly, in case of the textbooks, a particular skill might be highlighted, but other language skills are used nevertheless through the activities presented in the book.

Therefore, implementing integrated skills approach in ESL classes can have some upper hands in contrast to segregated skills approach. Although, discrete skills approach can teach the learners the language skills in an orderly manner, but integrating them allows them to use these skills simultaneously during communication. Here, in case of the former the language practice is controlled and contrive, whereas the latter gives simulation of communication in real-life context (Jing, 2006, p.2; Sanchez, 2000, p.23; Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014, p.94). Here, simultaneous use of the skills can be very beneficial for the learners as they improve uniformly in all four skills. Also, the four skills complement each other in classroom. For, example, the reading passage can give ideas to the learners for speaking or writing. Tajzad & Namaghi (2014) points out that integrated approach "provides the learners with reflection time" (p.97). The students are given the autonomy to reflect on the ideas of the reading or listening text by relating them with their own knowledge, view or experience through speaking or writing. Akram & Malik (2010) have discovered that, "reading helps the students get vocabulary to be used, and the learners give better performance in writing when all the skills are integrated at the first place". As mentioned earlier, in the traditional segregated approach learners were less motivated as they were taught language as a subject itself. Through integration of skills language is treated as means for interaction and inter-play, which boosts the motivation and confidence of the learners as they can express their own ideas and views without fearing the teacher. Tajzad & Namaghi (2014) explains that, integrating skills reduces learners' level of stress and anxiety by engaging them in real communication of ideas rather than mechanical practice of skills and components (p.97). Also, the segregated approach focuses on form, mastery of language, accuracy. However, the integrated approach focuses meaning, using language for communication, fluency. The former approach is stressful as it encourages memorisation and mastery of language forms, whereas the latter is less stressful and cognitively less demanding as it focuses on expressing and exchanging ideas (Akram & Malik, 2010, Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014, pp.95-96). Discrete skills approach is strictly teacher centered as the teacher sets the tasks and activities. However, integrated skills approach gives learners' autonomy and is centered on the learners as they are free to construct and negotiate meaning during reading and listening as well as exchange and share ideas during writing and speaking. This challenges and reconstructs the teacher's role in the class. Also, is increases Student Talking Time and decreases Teacher Talking Time. Tajzad & Namaghi (2014) notes that integration of skills leads to "reconceptualization of teacher's role (p.96). In short, Jing feels that, successful integration of

skills can make the lessons dynamic by involving the learners in various activities which gives them the scope for interaction and communication thus makes them motivated to learn (Jing, 2006).

Skills can be integrated in different manners in class based on the learners and the context. Hinkel (2010) mentions that, incorporating the two skills in the same language medium is the simplest and most basic integrated teaching approach; e.g. spoken to include listening and speaking, or written to include reading and writing. This integration can come very naturally in class without much effort from the teacher and the students. Also, receptive skills (listening and reading) cannot function alone in ESL classroom. Therefore, one productive skill; either writing or speaking; can be incorporated with the receptive skill. For instance, in case of listening skills, learners can either write or speak in order to express what they have comprehended from the listening text. More complex integration takes place when more than two skills are integrated. Here, the integration can be among three or four skills. According to Hinkel (2010), complex integrated happens when the class is a combination of multiple language skills. For instance, listening and reading input in order to promote an activity on speaking or writing, listening and reading input in order to promote one activity on speaking and another on writing. In this case, the content and theme of the tasks or activity will influence what skills will be integrated. Hinkel (2010) also agrees that, in complex integrated classroom situation the materials are organized based on the same theme. Therefore, this is a more “Discourse based approach” (Hinkel, 2010) where the skills are organized in a way that facilitates thematic cohesion, rather than focusing on discrete language items without any context.

There is still the need for more research regarding what should be done by the teachers to integrate the skills successfully in class. From the research it can be summarised that, teachers need to familiarise themselves with the ways of integrating the language skills in ESL classroom. According to Oxford (2001), in recent years, skills are mostly integrated under CBLT, TBLT, or combining both. Also, they can look at their existing approach towards skills teaching in class and evaluate it. It is the responsibility of the teachers to reflect on the possible ways to integrate more skills to make their classes more dynamic. Here, they should focus on the learners’ need and teaching them authentic language use. In Harmer's opinion, competent users of a language are proficient in a range of language skills and are able to use them in real-life. Thus, teachers should prepare the learners to implement their language knowledge outside the classroom by creating an authentic environment in the class where they can practice different range of skills. In addition, integration of skills depend on the proficiency level of the learners. For learners with lower proficiency level integration can be general and basic; whereas for more advances learners it can become more refined and complex. Moreover, Oxford (2001) advocates that, materials, textbooks, and technologies that promote the integration of the skills as well as the sub-skills of language can be chosen by the teacher. Although some materials or textbooks may not include skills integration, the teacher can be creative, and can find ways to incorporate other language skills in activities and tasks. Some strategies; such as predicting and, inferring; can be useful for more than one skills in ESL classrooms. Again Oxford (2001) suggests that, the language learning strategies that enhance performance in multiple skills can be taught by the teacher. Through this process, the teacher can make Second language acquisition easier for the learners. However, unnecessary mixing too many skills without any thematic connection is confusing for the students, and it will be

counterproductive in the long run. Baturay & Akar (n.d.) mentions that, skills integration should not be forced, rather they need to follow real life communication (p.18). Therefore, while integrating the skills teacher should make a thematic connection among them Also, transition from one skill to the other should be smooth (Baturay & Akar, n.d., p.19; Sanchez, 2000, p.37-38).

CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the existing research on skills teaching in classroom situation and tries to analyse the classroom implications of discrete and integrated skills teaching in ESL classes. Although discrete teaching can allow the learners to thoroughly study isolated skills, integration makes them competent to use the language. As Hinkel (2006) claims, “in an age of globalization, pragmatic objectives of language learning place an increased value on integrated and dynamic multiskill instructional models with a focus on meaningful communication and the development of learners’ communicative competence” (p. 113). Therefore, integration of skills can prove to be effective in ESL classes if the teacher is dedicated enough to study the models for integration of skills and use them effectively in class. Integration of skills has its certain drawbacks, but they can be prevented if the integration is aimed at creating a classroom environment where authentic communication is prioritised where skills are integrated naturally. However, teacher should recognise learners’ needs and be sensitive to their culture and should not force integration on them which will be counterproductive in the long run. Despite certain shortcomings; such as, lack of practical evidence of skills teaching in ESL classroom, learners’ reflection towards skills teaching, and time constraint; this research tried to analyse skills teaching. Further research on teachers’ principle and actual practice of skills teaching in ESL class will be beneficial to build a more focused model for teaching skills in future.

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