

An Approach to the Integration of Skills in English Teaching

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Resumen

Con frecuencia, las destrezas de comprensión y expresión en la clase de lengua extranjera se han venido practicando como compartimentos estanco. Estos enfoques han producido una separación entre la realidad del aula y la que nos encontramos en la vida real, produciendo una artificialidad nada propia de la práctica comunicativa. Este artículo pretende hacer hincapié en las prácticas integradas de las cuatro destrezas, para convertir las clases en un escenario más auténtico desde el punto de vista de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, y más significativo y motivador para profesores y alumnos. Se trata de ofrecer una base para la práctica contextualizada de los contenidos lingüísticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Integración, destrezas, comprensión, producción.

Abstract

Receptive and productive skills have frequently been practised in isolation within teaching syllabuses. Such approaches have in many ways made an artificial distinction between in-classroom and out-of-classroom realities, which is not inherent to communicative practice. This article will focus on how the integration of all four skills can contribute towards a more real-life environment for both teachers and learners, as well as more meaningful and motivating. The basic idea is to offer a common ground for linguistic content to be fully contextualised.

KEY WORDS: Integration, skills, receptive, productive.

Résumé

Fréquemment les habiletés de compréhension et expression ont été considérées dans la classe de langue étrangère comme des compartiments étanches. Ces pratiques de classe ont produit une séparation entre la réalité de la classe et celle que nous trouvons dans la vie réelle, produisant, dans le premier cas, une séparation artificielle inexistante dans la communication authentique. Le propos de cet article est d'insister sur l'intégration des quatre compétences pour faire de la classe de langue un endroit plus authentique du point de vue de l'enseignement / apprentissage et plus significatif et motivant pour professeurs et élèves et de présenter une démarche pour la pratique contextualisée des éléments du système de la langue.

MOTS CLÉS: Intégration, compétences, compréhension, production.

1. Introduction

When we are teaching a second language we are trying to develop in the learner not just *grammatical competence* in the Chomskyan sense, but *communicative competence*. The learner must, it is true, develop the ability to produce and understand grammatical utterances, he must be able to distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical sequences, but he must also know when to select the one which is appropriate to the context, both linguistic and situational. Therefore, the language data to which the learner is exposed should be presented «in context».

If ELT does not only involve the teaching of the English sound system, grammatical structures or vocabulary, but the practice of the contexts in which they occur —that is, understanding and producing language—, teachers will have a fundamental task in providing the students with texts, oral passages and situations for the students to communicate both in the written and the spoken form. These are the so-called **four skills** of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The work presented here intends to show an integrative approach to the teaching and practice of the language skills, bearing in mind that the language class will become more purposeful and meaningful for the learner at all levels if we do so. The methodological principles behind this approach are equally applicable to general English, English for specific purposes, or the Primary English classroom.

Ewen Arnold (1993) points out that many tasks in task-based courses are purposeless because nothing is done with the students' output and it does not lead anywhere. The idea is to make the classroom contexts and situations come closer

to the real-life ones, no matter how artificial or simulated we may think that the teaching and learning environment is. It is a matter of linking tasks; by way of example, when we deal with an answerphone message (listening), we often have to use this information in the spoken or written form (by calling someone back or writing a note).

Our primary concern as teachers is to activate strategies for learning in the students, as well as providing student-centred materials which focus on the process of communication. Let us see in which way the integration of skills contribute to the task of facilitating second language learning.

2. Why should we integrate skills?

If we ask, «What is the ultimate aim of language teaching?» most teachers would probably agree that one answer is that students should be able to understand and produce the language that they need—in other words, we want them to develop their autonomy in language use, that is, a kind of freedom in their choice of language and manner. By integrating skills we are providing a certain input that becomes a basis for further output, which in turn will be new input, and so on. In this way the students' contributions turn out to be part of the process in which language is generated.

Rather than focusing on ways of controlling the language and ideas that students produce, we should always be looking for ways to *free things up*. Similarly, we should move the students from the role as *consumers* in the classroom towards the role as *producers*. By doing this, we are also likely to move away from «language specific» work and instead involve the students in broader educational processes. Some teachers will actually say that they are only responsible for teaching the language, and not for the general educational development of the students. However, as noted by Andrew Littlejohn (1998: 10):

Whether we are aware of it or not, students will always learn more in their language classes than just language. They will also learn their role in the classroom and (to a greater or lesser extent) pick up values and attitudes from the texts they use. They will also learn a lot about themselves as learners, and about what language learning involves.

In my view, when we integrate skills we are thinking beyond language alone and reflect on how our teaching does, or does not, enrich the lives of the students; and, most importantly, we are using the target language and culture to do so.

Littlewood also mentions a number of principles that I find useful as a starting point to plan a series of lessons or coursebook units if we are to analyse the teaching of skills from a holistic point of view:

- **Making teaching coherent** means to ensure that tasks link together around a common topic which lasts a whole lesson or extends over a series of lessons. In this way the content will stay with the learner longer —and with it, the language. Otherwise, a random choice of topic to exemplify a language form makes it more difficult to learn the language, as there is nothing coherent to make it memorable.

- Another way to enrich our teaching of skills and make language learning more effective is to **use content worth learning about**. We should expose the students to bits of language (through *Reading* or *Listening*) that are significant for the students to produce their own language (in *Writing* or *Speaking*)

- **Using the students' intelligence:** If we want to make language learning more challenging and motivating, we should use what Chih-Hua Kuo (1993) calls *process-oriented materials*. The type of activities involved in the use of these materials are unpredictable in nature and the learner must interpret and make inferences and decisions, since they are cognitively demanding. They facilitate interaction and the development of both linguistic knowledge and communication skills. The integration of skills comes more naturally if we accept that the students' planning, reviewing and evaluating of their work is more motivating than a mere pattern practice, matching or repetition.

- **Fostering autonomy:** Only when the students are able to understand or express the language that they need or want, can we think that there is a sense of achievement, which is essential in the learning process.

A group of EOI teachers in Barcelona have recently published some work (1998) on the analysis and exploitation of authentic audiovisual materials. Their conclusions point to the necessity to make the students aware that if there is a task to carry out, their outcome should be relevant for them to apply in other in-classroom situations, as well as outside the classroom.

Obviously the objective for English language learners must be better communication; better communication with their peers, with sources of information and other learning resources, such as literature, songs or Internet materials. It is here, in a dynamic learning environment where the integration of skills, either within a lesson or within a block of lessons, makes it easier for the

students to work towards a project or final product, i.e. a certain language task for which the learners are asked to produce something in English —either a letter, a poster to display in the classroom, a leaflet, an advertisement, a survey, an interview or a discussion panel. The important thing is that they are using the language they need naturally and that different skills are involved in the process.

In sum, apart from the above mentioned, skill-integration makes learning more meaningful and purposeful, because the students can see that what they are learning or practising leads to some other task. It also introduces variety in the classroom dynamics and facilitates understanding of language areas and vocabulary fields to be dealt with in an oral or written passage at later stages; for these reasons, we should also provide *pre* and *post session* activities to contextualise and extend the content of receptive skills.

3. Communication skills and communication activities

Language skills cannot be learnt in isolation. While the classification of the *four skills* has some value if we look at language activity from the outside, the definition of language implied by this division ignores the function of language altogether ; the four categories describe things which happen, but only as external, unmotivated activities. Thus, we require a different specification of objectives if we want to enable learners to develop their capacities in the way they are described by the language acquisition theory. There are interconnections between the activities described by the traditional four skills, and these will be dealt with in greater detail below.

It seems to be reasonable to suppose that many of the difficulties that learners have had in the past derive directly from the teaching that has been imposed upon them. This has tended to represent language as a set of formal elements to be manifested and apprehended by means of linguistic skills outside a real communicative context and without a real communicative purpose. Such a model of language is remote from the learner's own experience and it is no wonder that they have difficulties in acquiring it.

The suggestion here is to link the students' communicative abilities in their own language to a realization of these abilities in the language they are learning. We need to associate the linguistic skills in the mother tongue with the ones in the foreign language.

Traditionally, it has been taken as read that once the linguistic skills are acquired, the communicative abilities will follow as a more or less automatic consequence. Widdowson (1978: 67) expressed a very different view on the matter:

The acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language. On the contrary, it would seem to be the case that an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities. (...) The abilities include the skills: one cannot acquire the former without acquiring the latter. The question is: how can the skills be taught, not as a self-sufficient achievement but as an aspect of communicative competence?

There seem to be four major activities in language work, that is, acts we perform through language:

- 1) conversation or discussion
- 2) comprehension (either of speech or writing)
- 3) extended writing
- 4) extended speaking.

Brumfit (1984: 70) considers that the fourth activity should be treated as an independent problem, since it occurs only at advanced levels and it is not an activity that all native speakers actually use or require.

The argument for reclassifying the «four skills» in this way is, first, that the new classification integrates each activity with communication, whereas the listening/speaking distinction particularly separates activities which are often in practice simultaneous and interdependent. Also, it focuses attention on meaning rather than on the analysable formal elements. Brumfit goes beyond the traditional approach:

The traditional emphasis on the four skills has frequently reduced «writing» to a concern with handwriting and transfer of spoken to written form with little attention to discourse structure, and listening to a concern with minimal pairs or comprehension of isolated sentences. This alternative proposal also corresponds to common-sense assessments of what we do with language, in that each of the four activities listed is observably different from the others, and requires response to different conventions¹.

The same author justifies the inclusion of the comprehension of speech and writing together, due to the increasing evidence that the distinction between spoken and written forms is not as important as the choice of content or genre in the organisation of continuous text. The process of planning a speech does not differ greatly from that of drafting an extended written text. The planning of extended speaking may be treated as a development from the planning of extended writing.

¹ Brumfit, C. (1984): *Communicative methodology in language teaching*. Cambridge, CUP, pág. 70.

Michael Branenbraun (1997) also prefers to refer to activities rather than skills, regarding them as more pragmatic and realistic, since language users hardly ever use language skills isolatedly. Therefore, we are engaged in **comprehension** (which includes Listening and Reading), **composition** (present both in Speaking and Writing) and **conversation** (Listening and Speaking combined).

He finds the splitting of skills idle and counterproductive and points out that testing must remain loyal to learning, rather than teaching. Tests will then be better and more informative of the students' level if they have a direct bearing on what the students do with the language.

Potential future trends in testing techniques suggest, therefore, that integrating skills will bring us to an exam format in which there is no more than an input, an output and a combined exercise to evaluate a candidate's language proficiency. However, the area of testing is not the core of these reflections here and now, although it seems to be inevitable to mention it, when it comes to analysing the interconnections of skills and how they are shown by language learners / exam candidates.

4. Skill getting and skill using; their implications for testing

Knowledge of a language implies possessing the means to put a number of different skills into practice. Each skill depends on the facility to manipulate a multiplicity of small elements which are closely interrelated in actual language use. On the other hand, *control of a language* means being able to use it in an integrated, global fashion for understanding and communicating (in either the aural-oral or the graphic mode) in a native-like way —an imitation of it—, respecting the same social conventions and cultural values. Such two concepts equal the so-called *linguistic* and *communicative* competence.

If we accept that the acquisition of a second language is a highly complex process, we will assume that it involves both skill getting and skill using. Students need the knowledge of many small details and a certain facility in activating this knowledge to perform in the language with a certain fluency and coherence in discourse, if they wish to keep their interlocutor's attention.

Language teachers can hardly escape the routine of evaluating the learners' performance more or less formally and on a regular basis. Integrated tests require the exercise of several skills in interaction to analyse the total communicative effect, rather than specific discrete-point samples of a particular course of training. That's why they are sometimes referred to as overall language proficiency tests. Discrete-point tests test skill getting, while integrative tests test skill using. Both kinds of tests have their place and serve specific purposes at various levels.

Having made that point, highlighting the reflection that L2 learning has in the design of tests, it is time to move a step forward in order to unveil some common aspects that seem to affect the learning process itself.

5. Order of learning

The divergent attitudes towards various aspects of language learning have led to a very different order of priorities in the teaching of the four skills. The formalist tends to place high value on skill in reading and accurate writing. Communicative approaches lay emphasis on the spoken language and consider practice in oral communication to be a necessary accompaniment to fluent reading and original writing.

Whether foreign-language skills should be learnt in the order in which children learn their native language has been a matter of controversy between applied linguists. The situation of both types of learners is dissimilar in many ways: whereas children are forming concepts and acquiring language at the same time, surrounded by the speech of their family group, foreign language students already possess an effective means of communication; to learn another, they must limit themselves and embarrass themselves by their obvious incapacity to express their real meaning. For many of the latter, all this language-learning business is merely a classroom activity.

Since mother tongue acquisition differs markedly from second-language study, the order of learning language skills cannot be justified, then, merely by analogy with native-language learning. As Rivers (1981) suggests, the basic question for the teacher is not one of nature or logic but of the best order of presentation from the pedagogical point of view. Many different combinations of skills seem to have been successful in introducing the student to the language. **It is what is done with the learned material to extend it as early as possible to active use that is crucial.**

Decisions on ordering of skills will largely depend on the aims of the course. Where communication skills are the main objective, listening and speaking seem the obvious place to begin. If reading is the primary objective, texts may be tackled directly through deciphering techniques. From the point of view of motivation, the aural-oral skills are a good starting point for any general course because most students come to their first language class with the notion that language is something that one hears and speaks. Such an approach is more likely to keep the students' interest, since it lends itself to more activity and participation by the students. Few people would argue against the fundamental role played by the subject's own personal involvement in linguistic tasks.

Nevertheless, many experienced teachers have objected that some students feel very insecure when they are forced to depend on the ear alone. It may be thought that it is better for the students to see the correct, accepted version of the written language at an earlier stage and learn to use it as a help and support for learning and practice. In my view, though, it seems a reasonable approach to present all new material first in oral form, especially in the elementary sections of the course; to give the students practice in working with this material orally until they can handle it; then to train them with the script. After the students have received some help from the printed version, they should be given opportunities to practise the material orally until they can demonstrate that they have learnt it thoroughly and are able to apply it to their own situations.

The matter of encoding and decoding messages through the use of the skills in a second language is connected with certain verbal abilities acquired in the mother tongue; however, the instruction in a second language will need to *re-teach*, to some extent, what was learnt in one's own language. In Pit Corder's words (1973: 116):

(...) learning to read and write presupposes (at least, in all normal people) the ability to speak and hear; in other words, it requires the possession of some verbal behaviour. Thus, the language teacher is concerned not with teaching speaking and hearing, etc, but *speaking in French, or reading German or hearing Italian*. The teacher does not teach language skills from scratch but rather modifies or extends these skills in some perhaps relatively superficial fashion.

We can now take an overview at some of the different possibilities and connections for an effective teaching of the skills to take place in our classroom situations.

6. Writing and other skills

Writing is not a skill which can be learned in isolation. In the apprentice stage of writing, what the student must learn, apart from the peculiar difficulties of spelling or script, is a counterpart of what has to be learnt for the mastery of listening comprehension, speaking and reading —a nucleus of linguistic knowledge. The activity of writing helps to consolidate the knowledge for use in other areas, since it gives the student practice in manipulating structures and selecting and combining lexical elements.

Written questions based on a reading passage encourage the student to read the text more attentively and discover areas which were misinterpreted on the first reading. Only by hearing and reading a great deal of the language as it is spoken and written by native speakers can language learners acquire that feeling

for the appropriate use of language forms and combinations, which is basic to expressive writing.

The most effective writing practice will have a close connection with what is being practised in relation to other skills. We should be aware, though, that not everybody will reach a high standard in composition. Interference of the first language explains the unacceptable forms that many produce in the written form, the construction of hybrid phrases without realising that these are incomprehensible in the context of the new language.

Attempts should be made to encourage the learners to use structures and expressions they have already learned in oral practice and in reading, creating interesting and amusing pieces of expressive writing. By doing so, they will be using much language material which otherwise would escape from their active memory.

More effective results will be achieved in writing exercises if there is a continual integration of practice in all the skills. When the students have read, heard and said to themselves or others what they are expected to write, they are more likely to write it correctly.

When dictation procedures are employed for reproduction, two skills are being exercised at once: listening and writing. The dictation practice will then be reinforcing practice in listening comprehension, as well as providing practice in accurate writing. As students advance in language learning, phrases dictated will gradually be lengthened, until students are eventually able to retain complete sentences in their immediate memory and write them down correctly.

Notetaking and the writing of reports can be further developments from exercises in listening comprehension. Anything available in the recorded form or lectures themselves can be the basis for written composition. Similarly, wide reading and practice in putting some of the material read into an uncomplicated written form will consolidate the students' familiarity with many language items and make these more available for selection in oral expression. By integrating skills we are also giving the learners more opportunities to understand and broaden cultural concepts, since these *happen* through a wide variety of channels, both written and oral —apart from a wide range of visual ones

In order to ensure the potential contribution of other skill areas, the teacher should promote active class discussion of what has been heard or read and encourage the presentation of short oral reports. This will follow the communicative principle of **task-dependency**, which is essential to make the lessons meaningful from the students' point of view.

A story may be rewritten in dialogue form, or a dialogue rewritten as a narrative. We should, however, remember that not all students have a ready flow of ideas when asked to write, even in their native language. Therefore, composition

exercises should not be designed so that they become tests of originality and invention (although imaginative students should not be discouraged to go beyond what is required). The writing of an original dialogue, using the vocabulary area of some recent writing, keeps the student practising in the style of spoken language.

Composition exercises may profitably be linked with assignments for extensive reading. This composition may consist of a summary of the contents with a personal commentary or the narration of some aspect of the story assigned previously by the teacher. The students will then be encouraged to select their own approach and demonstrate the level of expression of which they are capable.

7. Listening and other skills

Integrating the listening into a longer sequence of work demonstrates to the students that the effort they have put into understanding is not wasted. For a number of reasons, the skill of listening could be regarded as the most difficult to develop, whether we look at it from a cognitive perspective or due to the added difficulties that derive from the acoustics. Helping students to improve their listening to spoken English is a vital part of the teacher's job. The better students understand what they hear, the better they will take part in spoken interactions.

Listening comprehension activities should spring naturally from, or provide material for, oral practice or reading; they can also provide a stimulus for writing activities. This idea is also expressed by Rivers (1981: 167):

When various skills are integrated into free-flowing activities, in which one provides material for the other, students learn to operate confidently within the language, easily transferring knowledge acquired in one area for active use in another. It is most important that the teacher not compartmentalize the learning (...)

Integration of the various aspects of language use requires careful preparation on the part of the teacher, so that opportunities for natural movement from one language modality to another evolve continually during each lesson. Task-based activities, such as labelling, form-filling, completing a grid, etc. reflect much more closely the type of response that might be given to a listening experience in real-life. They demand individual responses. Filling in forms, labelling diagrams or making choices obliges every learner to try to make something meaningful of what they are hearing. This is especially effective if the class is asked to work in pairs, since fostering cooperative learning should be one of our primary objectives when we design the teaching syllabus.

Many teachers tend to focus upon the product of listening, when, in fact, it would be more illustrative to pay attention to the process, that is, what is going on in the heads of our learners. Rivers mentions that since listening and reading involve similar processes (speech perception), one would expect the development of listening strategies through intensive practice to carry over to reading. Furthermore, if there is a nucleus of linguistic knowledge of the structure and lexicon of the language, basic to the operation of all the language skills, then it should not surprise us that practising this basic corpus in one modality will make it more available for use in the other.

Conversely, psycholinguistic research makes clear that listening and speaking are not decoding-encoding processes which are mirror images of each other. In fact, we can see that the knowledge of the language we require for comprehension of oral input may be quite different from that required for expressing our meaning in speech and writing. In listening (and reading), expectations and inference help us create a meaning from semantic clues, so that it is often unnecessary to recognise or comprehend the significance of morphological or syntactic elements. On the other hand, our own utterances will usually not be comprehensible, and will frequently be unacceptable, if we do not use these elements correctly ourselves.

It seems to be widely accepted that prediction is an extremely important stage. It allows students to get interested in the topic and predict the kind of vocabulary they are likely to hear. It means, above all, that they are not approaching the task from scratch. This may take the form of discussing the topic or showing pictures that the students interpret before they listen. We could also give them written and spoken versions of the same story and ask them to note the grammatical and lexical differences between them.

There are, however, contrasted views on how to approach the post-listening stage. *John Field (1998)* mentions that it is worthwhile to pick out any functional language and draw learners' attention to it by asking them to remember the exact words for an invitation, apology, suggestion and so on. Rivers, however, thinks that asking the students to pay attention to the surface structure will distract them from overall meaning. Generally speaking, information-gap activities, in which the students check their understanding with peers by completing a task, seem to be effective. It is also desirable to set some further work in which productive output is called for. We should encourage learners to disagree with each other —thereby increasing motivation for a second listening and making listening a much more interactive activity.

The use of the students first language in the EFL class has been frowned upon by many specialists for the last few decades for a number of indisputable reasons.

Quite a few are inclined to think that there can be no better teacher than a native speaker who never uses the students' mother tongue in the classroom —regardless of his / her teaching background. However, studies on contrastive analysis have focused on the importance for the foreign language learner of being aware of the similarities and differences between both languages. This has clear implications for the teaching and practice of listening skills.

If we want our students to get away from literal translations and mother tongue interference, an idea to help them understand difficult patterns of discourse follows: we can dictate them a sentence in L1 which is a non-literal version of what they are going to listen to in the target language. We then ask them to locate (as they listen) and transcribe the exact words used to phrase this idea in L2. Alternatively, we may have asked them before listening to give their own version as they imagine this would be said in the oral form, and later compare their own version to the real one. By doing so, we would be giving them reasons for listening and, at the same time, they would be focusing on specific language patterns that might otherwise remain unattended or offer difficulties for understanding. Whatever we do, our true aim should not be simply to provide practice but to produce better and more confident listeners.

8. Reading and other skills

Reading at advanced levels may be included as a reference tool, to provide material for more informed discussion of aspects of the target culture, but it should not be to the detriment of the time devoted to oral communication. It is preferable to use for this purpose articles from magazines and newspapers where reading is individual preparatory work, done out of the classroom.

It is useful in teaching reading to make a distinction between recognition and production grammar. The syntactic details the reader needs in order to extract the important elements of the message are fewer and may be different from those which are important when producing one's own messages in speech or writing. Rivers (1981: 267) makes a clear distinction between processes in speech production and speech perception:

Perception of spoken or written messages is primarily dependent on apprehension of semantic meaning, moving from what one perceives in the sound sequence or in the written script to the idea, with recourse to knowledge of syntax only when the meaning is not clear or an ambiguity or misdirected interpretation is detected (...) In production the speaker or writer expresses the intention or idea through the operation of the syntactic system.

Students should not be expected or encouraged to stop whenever they meet a new or rather unfamiliar word to insert a native-language gloss between the lines. This habit must be discouraged if they are to learn to think in a second language. They could increase their vocabulary by keeping individual notebooks in which they copy words they wish to remember. These words should be copied down in complete phrases or sentences, so that the students are reminded of the context in which they would be appropriately used, thus providing written practice from reading input.

Extensive reading fosters vocabulary growth and the acquisition of syntax in context. By reading, one may develop personal intuitions about what good writing looks like; practising and applying those intuitions in writing is probably the best way for a student to become a good writer in a second language. In fact, there are courses, programs and teaching practices whose rationale is based on the assumption that there is a strong relationship between reading and writing.

One of the fundamental principles in second language acquisition is the claim that people acquire a second language only if they obtain comprehensible input which they allow «in». The input hypothesis may also apply to the acquisition of writing competence, as Krashen and Terrell (1983) point out when they highlight the fact that reading can serve as an important source of comprehensible input and may make a significant contribution to the development of overall proficiency.

The assumption underlying is that writing competence is acquired subconsciously, without readers being aware that they have acquired it, while they are reading. We could even go further to illustrate the connections between reading and writing. Foong (1988), points to the fact that studies have been conducted which find that those who get pleasure from reading at all ages, especially at high school, are better writers, while none of the poor writers seem to report «a lot» of pleasure reading at high school. He concludes that persons with good writing ability do more reading than persons with poor writing ability.

When it comes to discussing comprehension processes through receptive skills, the terms «**bottom-up**» and «**top-down**» play a fundamental role; they describe two different paths to comprehension. They are metaphors which presuppose that we view comprehension in terms of hierarchy, with lower or higher levels of processing. Lower levels relate to the sound or print stimulus and are concerned with recognising and decoding it; higher levels are involved with comprehending and constructing the meaning of what is being heard or read.

Bottom-up processing suggests that linguistic information is received and processed beginning with the smallest unit and ending with larger units of meaning. Meaning, at any level, is accessed only once processing at previous levels has been completed. Top-down theories, in contrast, put forward a non-linear view of the

process. Comprehension begins with the reader's or listener's own contribution, making hypothesis about what is coming next and confirming predictions. In listening, the quantity of incoming information makes it impossible for the human auditory system to process all of it. Amos Paran (1997) mentions that the processing of information when listening must be regulated by higher level cognitive processes. Incoming information is sampled and sampling is done on the basis of the listener's expectations, previous knowledge, and what has already been processed.

Such a statement seems to suggest that when reading, however, the actor of the process has more control over the pace and can therefore vary the speed and the focus of the activity, going back to previous units of meaning to facilitate comprehension or to reinforce ideas. This may explain the big difference in the construction of meaning between the skills of reading and listening. The different nature of the processes would also account for the various degrees of linguistic challenge and would prove that listening may be more demanding than reading. Nevertheless, it would be true to say that the level of difficulty is also dependent on such factors as subject matter, register, complexity of meaning relations or lexical items, context and so forth.

9. Speaking and its implications

Rather than mechanical drills and repetitions, the purpose of this section is to focus on those situations where students use as much language as they can and where getting the message across is just as important as grammatical accuracy. If no English course is complete without writing or grammar, speaking is another essential strand of the language. Oral speech is the students' output, which can be based on previous written or oral input, or it can also lead to further activities in which the students continue to be involved. In both cases we would be approaching the classroom reality in a realistic and motivating way by integrating the language skills.

Speaking activities give learners a chance for rehearsal — practising the real skill of speaking as a preparation for using it outside the classroom. It also provides valuable feedback about their language knowledge, for both themselves and their teachers. Moreover, speaking activities also provoke **genuine student engagement** where they really get involved with the process of language learning in class.

Activities that work well tend to include a task with a clear, achievable **end product**. If they are personalised and relevant to the students' lives, they will see the link between what they are doing and life around them, which makes the whole process more meaningful. The tasks should have a purpose which is not purely

linguistic —such as solving a problem or reaching a decision and should maximise the range of language they will have to use. Questionnaires, surveys and other information-gap activities are popular, generate genuine discourse practices and lend themselves to an integration of the skills and task dependency. They can help teachers to overcome what Vaughan and Spencer (1997) call TAB in teenage students (Task Avoidance Behaviour). We should engage the students by making them want to take part in a tangible task with a clear purpose.

Discussions provide ideal opportunities for speaking. Some of the most enjoyable classes are ones where unplanned discussions suddenly arise on issues that matter to the students. As the students' level progresses, we can gradually make tasks more demanding by requiring a higher level of performance both in terms of accuracy and fluency, as well as the vocabulary range used in class.

Speaking activities can be used at any stage, not just at the end of a teaching sequence. Sometimes it is the students' performance that helps the teacher to decide what to teach next. It is also good to explain the objectives of the activities so that the students have visible, quantifiable progress; besides, feedback should be given after the task has been completed. Monitoring during the activity is the best way to identify problem areas.

Pair and group work is vital to increase the student talking time and create a motivating collaborative atmosphere. As lessons become more interactive between teacher and student and between students themselves, they can see the **real purpose of communication** in the written and spoken modes. Nowadays, fewer teachers are reluctant to admit that communication is the primary purpose of *General English* language instruction.

One of the tasks that may provide more genuine communication and practice in all the skills, especially at intermediate levels and above is the use of students' mini-lectures (5-10 minutes). It trains speaking and listening skills and helps them gain more flexibility in English using indirect input. Monika Gedicke (1997) describes ways of involving the whole class in student lectures. She decided to ask some students to give short talks on books they had read or on various topics they would need as background information for further work. The students have the chance to experience peer-learning and also learn to speak freely in front of a group.

Things to avoid when conducting this type of task are the students' reading out a text they have previously written, or going through the texts learnt by heart at home. What could also happen is that the listeners switch off or get bored when the activity is only good for the lecturer at the expense of valuable classroom time for the rest of the students in the room.

To sustain the listeners' interest and provoke active involvement the lecture cannot be a one-way communication. The listeners must ask questions, either as a

group or as individuals, determine what they want to find out about the subject matter, restate lecture content and offer comments. They must also answer questions asked by the lecturer who, beforehand, has prepared a handout with the main arguments, explained essential vocabulary and outlined the structure of his or her lecture.

As a first step to this classroom activity, teachers may model first, trying out their own lectures so that the students can get used to their new role as active listeners and speakers. The listeners may do some background reading from coursebook texts and also take notes, this allowing to incorporate written English to the whole process. Language problems that arise can be dealt with in later error correction, unless they stand in the way of communication.

We can always improve language tasks if we increase the demand for student-generated ideas and language. In the design of a task we have to look at two elements: *what*, that is, the content or topic and *how* (e.g. information-gap in pairs, brainstorming with the whole class, etc.). For each activity type we can see how much «freedom» or «control» there is for the student and pay attention to the procedure. We need to, progressively, increase the amount of time we devote to «free» activities.

The teacher's selection of activities can only be determined by our understanding of the ultimate goal and our judgement of where the learners stand in relation to it. Littlewood (1981: 15) makes this distinction according to the stage of the course in which we find ourselves:

In the early stages of a course we may expose learners to the same basic linguistic material so that they can move gradually towards the ability to participate in meaningful interaction. Later, learners will have achieved greater independence in their learning and use of language. They will therefore be able to move more swiftly from the initial learning of new language to the point where they have integrated it into their repertoire and can use it in more independent forms of interaction.

10. Transitions between skills

Reading and understanding a piece of text is an activity which the reader is able to perform because he or she can follow relationships of thought, understand cohesive functions, infer the meaning of unknown words, and so on. The distinction between receptive and productive performance comes from the fact that the participant has to be able to understand more alternative possibilities than they have to produce.

There is a general belief amongst teachers that the *recognition* of an item is easier than its *retrieval* in production. Corder (1973: 262) blames on the difficulty

of devising means of studying receptive errors, which has prevented us from confirming these general impressions or from establishing the qualitative or quantitative relations between them:

It could well be that we overestimate the pupil's receptive abilities simply because we cannot so readily detect failures in comprehension. In any act of comprehension there is a major component supplied by the situation and the hearer.

The designing of syllabuses involves many different considerations, linguistic, pedagogic, sociolinguistic, psychological. The number of variables are too numerous. Since we teach groups and not individuals there must be a compromise to integrate a parallel set of syllabuses: syntactic, phonological, cultural and functional, and, within each of these, a parallel set of learning tasks.

The psycholinguistic processes which go on when we perform receptively and expressively in the linguistic activities do not occur in isolation but in some sort of sequence of coordination. The efficient learning of reading may also involve writing or speaking. However, we must not fall into a confusion of ends and means. If the end is the ability to speak, this does not rule out receptive activity or exercise as a means to that end. Some exposure to language is necessary in order to discover its rules, and consequently some learning of receptive skills must logically precede productive activity. We must learn something of reading before we learn to write, something of comprehension before we learn to speak.

What we aim for is a balanced method in which practice and development of a skill leads naturally to another one through useful and authentic contexts, both for understanding and producing language. Language input should therefore be used as a springboard for students' output. The final product should be seen as a consolidation of all that the students have learnt by working their way through a unit and not just as an extra activity.

One of the principles in which the transition between the skills is contained is that of providing pre, while and post activities in order to help students to make sense of the texts and oral passages, deal with difficult language or unknown vocabulary and develop their own strategies. Besides, they are more likely to see the point in what they are doing when activities are linked together as part of a larger task. Writing at elementary levels should be guided, as they cannot be expected to write something they have not already seen in a reading text.

One of the best ways in which smooth transitions between skills can be made is by approaching teaching and learning beyond the sole linguistic purpose. We should go beyond the artificial contents and modes of information delivery so common to language classes, and use the students' interests to engage them in a personalisation

process. It is a matter of using the foreign-language to LEARN about life, to inform, to entertain, to socialise. Bringing human activities into the second language classroom will contribute to turning it into a vehicle, a means, and not an end in itself; just in the same way as the student's mother tongue is for them. Therefore, we will create a real necessity to encode and decode messages in a different language; a language which is seen as a whole, not as a set of individual components.

11. A final product

Depending on the level of the students, topic areas, as well as vocabulary and language presented, we can set different tasks, some of which are presented below and can be exploited both receptively and productively, apart from involving a wide range of language skills:

Written Tasks: letters and messages; posters to be displayed; cartoon captions; advertisements and leaflets; reviews; summaries of class readers; essays; descriptions; (auto)biographies; surveys and questionnaires; creative writing; narrative accounts.

Spoken Tasks: class surveys; interviews; role-play and simulations; group contests; discussion panels; problem-solving activities; ranking activities; negotiation tasks and consensus-reaching; information-gap and transfer.

Whatever tasks we set, a factor that proves to be of paramount importance is the one of establishing a good classroom dynamics and a cooperative environment, since some of the top principles of effective learning have something to do with group cooperation. Whether we are looking at personal engagement, communication or motivation, anything we do as teachers of a foreign language must have team work as a basis for enjoyable class work. By no means can we expect to have interested individuals in our classes unless we give them clear purposes to use language in a practical way, by imitating human activities that resemble what happens outside the classroom.

12. Conclusions

I have tried to explore the theoretical background and analyse the methodological implications behind the approach of integrating the practice of

the four skills in the language classroom. The idea is to make the teaching and learning situation come closer to the way we do things in real life, in order to make classes more challenging, motivating and meaningful for the learners of English as a second language.

The underlying message is that foreign language teaching must be learner-centred to make students better *receivers* and *producers* of language in context, bearing in mind their needs and interests in both written and spoken situations. We, as teachers, must be concerned with reality: with the reality of communication as it takes place outside the classroom. Because both of these realities—in and out-of-classroom—are so complex, nobody will ever produce a definitive teaching methodology. Our job will therefore be to suggest the best possible tasks to help students incorporate a new linguistic code that will have to be used in different—or the same—stylistic, social and situational contexts as their mother tongue.

Another important thing is to be able to extract ideas applicable to every learning and teaching environment possible and adapt the approaches suggested here to the different age groups, backgrounds, needs, interests and abilities, as well as syllabuses and resources that we must follow or make use of. Only in this way will we be able to make *in-classroom* and *out-of classroom* events come closer for the students to make the most of our work and their own effort.

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