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Integrating four skills in English language classroom in Afghan universities

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Abstract

With no doubt integration of language skills is one of the important issues in terms of language teaching and learning. In the past, language teachers used to think of teaching language skills for example, reading, writing, listening and speaking separately. However, with the new developments and emergence of new methodologies in language teaching, that trend has been changed. That is, now most teachers, if not all, think that language skills should be integrated. This paper first examines the importance of integrating skills and its background. It then moves to the different ways of integrating the four skills in the classroom. Finally, the article provides some practical examples which hopefully will be useful to teachers at any level.

Keywords: integration, integrate, four skills of language, reading, writing, speaking, and listening

Introduction

Importance of Integrating Skills

One of the important pedagogical orientations (strategies) which I believe is of great importance to teaching is the integration of all the four skill areas. I think the idea about teaching the four skills in isolation was quite common in the past and still affects the minds of some teachers. That is, teachers were reluctant to accept that language skills could be integrated and taught together. In Afghanistan, this is still a dominant trend as large number of language teachers are not familiarized with the new pedagogical orientations and methods. In the past, I too used to believe like those who think we could teach the four skills in isolation; but now I believe that and thought about separating the four skills is an old-fashioned and the least ineffective and applicable approach. It is impossible to teach the four skills separately even if we want to because "It's like dividing water; it flows back together again" (cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 225) ^[4]. I believe the main reason behind this issue is no familiarity of the teachers about the new teaching methodologies and we cannot ignore the fact that in most of the undeveloped countries including Afghanistan, grammar translation is widely used in which the focus is no memorization and less concentration is given to communication skills.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators who advocate segregated-skill instruction think that learning language skills such as writing, reading listening in isolation is considered important to successful learning (Oxford, 2001) ^[7]. The author adds that traditional teachers believe that integrating the skills may need more facilities such as space, equipment, audio and video tools, etc. and is less economic comparing to teaching the skills separately. They also think that focusing on more than one skill at a time makes the instruction less effective.

I think such arguments are not convincing anymore and by integrating the language skills, the effectiveness of instruction is not questioned. Even if we integrate the four language skills, we can still maintain our focus on one skill. For instance, when we want to teach a topic from writing, we can integrate other skills like reading and listening without losing our main focus which is writing; the main reason behind incorporating the skills is to maximise the efficiency of instruction and enhance communication skills and language learning.

Moreover, based on experiential and theoretical knowledge, the importance of integrating the four skills has been emphasized and recommended. For instance, Kumaravadivelu (2003) ^[4] (cited Rost, 1990) utters, "Listening activities have found to help learners make the broader connection between the sociolinguistic concept of form and function and the psycholinguistic processes of interpretation and expression" (p. 228). In addition, Thornbury (2008) in his book "how to teach speaking claims" over their own speaking, students can develop listening, reading and writing skills through activities like drilling (listening and speaking skills), writing tasks that exposes students to longer processing of the input (writing

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skill), and reading aloud from a text (reading, listening, and speaking).

It can be learned that there are several interactive and content-based activities which the teachers can utilize appropriately and by so doing, all skills will be integrated. For instance, I used to think of brainstorming as more of a written strategy, but now I realized that it can be applied to all the four skills if carried out appropriately. That is, when we give a topic to students and ask them to discuss and share any ideas that strike them is a joint practice of listening and speaking; and when we ask them to read about that topic and then write about it, this is of course the reading and writing practice.

Now, it is better to provide some examples of how one can integrate the four language skills while concentrating on one skill.

1. The first example is integrating listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills although the main focus is on listening comprehension. First, I play an audio track about bribery in America. In this stage, the students only listen for general idea. I, then, give them some questions about the specific details and ask them to read. After-wards, I play the audio track for the second time and students will be looking for specific details. When the listening gets over, I will evaluate students' comprehension by asking the some questions based on the listening script. Finally, I ask them to write about bribery situation in Afghanistan.

Although the emphasis of this activity is on listening comprehension, speaking and writing are also integrated or focused.

2. The second example came from my writing class where I taught the students a writing genre (argumentative essay).

I write the topic (argumentative essay) on the board and ask students what they know about it and write their ideas in a piece of paper. Then, I ask them to read the handout about argumentative essay for 15 minutes; the handout is followed by some questions which test their comprehension about the topic. After they read for 15 minutes, I ask them to discuss their answers with their classmates in pair and then share with the class. After clarification of all questions, I give them a topic and assign them to write an argumentative essay.

Although the focus of this session is on writing, I have tried to integrative all the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3. The third example is how I integrated the three skills when I taught a linguistic course, first, I assigned my students to read a chapter about a linguistic issue. For example, morphology and then write a summary of it. The next day, I prepared some questions which were to test their comprehension of the concepts or ideas of morphology; this activity led to a whole class discussion where all complicated issues were clarified and explained. This is a good example of integrating reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Conclusion

Integration of language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in language teaching has been controversial as far as teaching and learning is concerned. In the past, there was more inclination toward teaching and dealing with language skills separately; however, now most teachers if not all

prefer to teach the skills together. This is what the new methods of teaching suggest and emphasize. In Afghanistan the tendency is still more on teaching the language skills separately. I believe through different activities, we can integrate the language skills while keeping our focus on one single skill. Brainstorming, for example, is mostly used for listening skills, but we can also use it for other language skills or even with listening skill, we can integrate other skills such as speaking, writing and reading. In conclusion, language skills are interwoven to each other and we should not try to separate them when we carry out different activities in the class.

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