

## **Towards an integrated approach to teaching: a unified perspective on teaching skills**

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*This article postulates that teaching English had gone a long way before it was acknowledged that teaching grammar or teaching vocabulary could not be equated to teaching English. This realisation has changed teachers' approach to teaching and learners' awareness of the language's ramified structure. By integrative approach it is understood the concurring of all teaching actions which address simultaneously language components and skills to the end of developing a full control of the language in learners. Faced with shortage of time, teachers avoid dealing with writing conventions, writing tasks or listening ones, to mention just a few of the time-consuming activities, in order to gain time for other skills which seem to prevail. Integrating in one's teaching the pronunciation and writing conventions, the skills, vocabulary and grammar would offer a more integrative perspective of the learners on what they need or want to learn. By scrupulously relating the teaching items to other elements in the language, the progress would be faster, and the language would be better understood and learnt. At the same time, the article aims at establishing connections both within language and across domains of knowledge where English, or any other foreign language, plays the role of a means facilitating learning.*

Keywords: *integrated teaching, skills, teaching strategies, content-based*

### **1. Why integrated teaching?**

Integrated teaching has grown as a further accentuation of the need to teach in such a way as to ensure immediate and obvious connections between the skills that students learn in order to achieve the goal of the students' producing 'authentic communication' (Oxford 2001, 5). Integrated teaching addresses language teaching as a holistic strategy by using shared teaching methods when teaching skills in English. Transferable knowledge coupled with skill interconnectivity are sure to facilitate teaching and trigger superior outcomes than

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when skills are taught separately. Integrated teaching is a concept that reflects reality and the common interactive pattern that prevails in all teaching situations.

When teaching vocabulary, teachers clarify any other problematic issues related to pronunciation, spelling, context, idiomatic structure, which is a proof that what may have started as a vocabulary teaching activity ends up targeting other aspects that needed teaching and that may not be proper vocabulary information. Similarly, teaching reading leads to rewarding insights into vocabulary and grammar which may be easily related to reading. Maybe less obvious could be the relationship between reading and writing, but dealing with reading tasks might help teachers teach paragraph structure, topic sentence or support sentences, cohesive devices, etc. Exploiting a reading task beyond its obvious purpose is worthwhile thanks to the cohesiveness of the linguistic message to the learner that would be exposed to a piece of language where all skills and all knowledge participate to a final goal: that of helping learner progress with their knowledge of the foreign language.

Segregating the teaching of the skills may as well result in an increased pressure on learners as no inter-skill transfer occurs, which otherwise might have facilitated learning. Separating writing from speaking means the absence of any transfer from writing's organisation and potentially more advanced vocabulary and grammar to speaking which might benefit from any knowledge transfer with a view to improving both organisation and content. Teaching skills separately is a waste of transferrable knowledge which could make learners advance faster in the study of English.

What is more, integrated teaching is not engrossed in setting which skills are better than others as no skill is better than another. The prevalence of any skill over others may not be an issue as long as the ultimate goal of the teaching activity is the learner's progress and mastery of English. Any acquisition in any skill is surely a piece of information likely to be reused and reintegrated in other skills that may enhance thanks to it. Notwithstanding, caution should be given to how learners are taught to integrate already-acquired knowledge in skills that may seem similar, but their guiding principles are different. This may be the case of speaking and writing, two productive skills, which nevertheless pertain to different registers that circumscribe them to rather opposing lexical, grammatical choices.

## **2. Teaching approaches and the evolution towards an integrative teaching**

Starting from the grammar translation approach which is strongly unrecommended (Lado 1964, 54) mainly due to the interference between the learners' L1 and their L2 to the communicative approach (Richards 2006, 3) going through the audiolingual approach (Skinner 1957, 15) and the suggestopedia (Mateva 1997, 66),

teaching has experimented with various methods that would put emphasis on one skill or part of the language to the detriment of others.

A method which seemed to have been largely accepted and to whose popularisation scores of important linguists contributed (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980; Littlewood 1981) reiterated the idea that learning a foreign language is not about translating from L1 into L2, it is not about acquiring linguistic structures and using them to perfection, it is mostly about using the language in real life contexts that gives users an insight into what natives do when they use English. Though attractive and much appreciated by teachers around the world for more than three decades now, the communicative approach hasn't escaped criticism which postulates that: 'it over-generalizes valid but limited insights until they become virtually meaningless; it makes exaggerated claims for the power and novelty of its doctrines; it misrepresents the currents of thought it has replaced; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion; it is choked with jargon' (Swan 1985, 2).

In line with the above criticism, the authors of this article would like to bring forth the dissipation of the communicative approach message to the point of considering the teaching of English as a preparation for communication with a total disregard for language accuracy, in other words, it is quantity at the detriment of quality. A similar idea is claimed by Didenko and Pichugova (2016, 2) who hold it that the communicative approach resulted in poor competence: 'preference of fluency over accuracy in practice promoted such low performance requirements that it resulted in poor competence.' The problems that the communicative approach tried to solve had a boomerang effect on language learning as it led to a lack of focus on the receptive skills reading and listening, thus missing the point of attributing equal importance to all skills and showing serious fallacies in covering all areas of English. It is even in the areas where the communicative approach boasted wonderful solutions, as for example in writing, that it turned out for the solutions to be exaggerated and the outcome much inferior. Still, the communicative approach, like other approaches before, has been the fertile soil which has culminated in a new teaching approach that shares elements with the communicative approach and takes some steps away from it, too.

Content-based teaching maintains a high interest in communication, but it equally engrosses in teaching content in various areas of academic studies, which makes it similar to ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Immersing learners in mathematics, history, geography or physics as non-native speakers of English does represent a challenge for any educational system. The switch in perspective suggests that teaching should begin from a large comprehensible topic which might naturally lead to the teaching of other language elements that might contribute to that topic. Stryker and Leaver (1997, 3) consider that 'it encourages students to learn a new language by playing real pieces – actually using that language, from the

very first class, as a real means of communication. The philosophy of content-based instruction aims at empowering students to become independent learners and continue the learning process beyond the classroom.'

Still one reason why these precepts have not been implemented yet is that teachers of different subjects might feel the pressure of teaching their subject in English as unbearable and might reject such initiatives. Teaching equations in English to non-native English-speaking learners comes with insurmountable risks that might not be overcome by either teachers, or learners, or both.

### **3. Integrative teaching: perspectives**

As language cannot be taught outside content, linking the teaching of foreign languages to content seems a solution to facilitate foreign language learning, to improve English skills and to contribute to knowledge dissemination via any foreign language. Mohan (1986, 7) pinpoints the primordality of the content over language as an expression of the real-life, communicative outcome which embeds language and responds to social demands. As content is the basis of integrative teaching, outlining the content's definition might elucidate the relationship between content and teaching.

To take for example the medicine, content represents every piece of information which has been natively produced in English in relation to medicine (medical encyclopaedias, textbooks, medical guides, medical procedures, technical medical devices and their instruction books, doctor-patient interaction, medical prescriptions) and that could be transformed into teaching material for any student that studies medicine. Similarly, in the colossal domain known as engineering, content refers to any piece of information which has as scope the explanation of the materials, structure, functioning, utility, fallacies and remedies for any piece of technical equipment. Strategies of building, repairing, assessing are also included in this domain that has witnessed an incredible ramification to the point of intersecting medicine, which it seemed to have no relation to.

Any such material could be chosen to be used for teaching purposes giving learners an insight into the domains they have already chosen as career paths. Integrating content and language should be understood as the use of medical-oriented materials with twofold purposes: firstly, the exposure of learners to real material from the domains they are interested in and secondly, as an excellent ground for subsequent learning activities which might encompass work on either skills or grammar and vocabulary.

Integrated teaching is less artificial, more motivating (Nuttall 1996, 172), more learner goal-oriented and it lends more importance to the domain of education rather than to the language itself, which, anyway, does not suffer any diminution, but

a re-organisation in terms of teaching-learning goals. And although some might fear that English would lose ground when adopting this teaching approach, the topic is only an excuse and a unifying line that mentally organises the input for learners. This approach enhances English learning, which is no longer a goal in itself, but a means to a goal, contributing to a wholistic approach of education. Starting from a topic of interest in the domain can easily incorporate vocabulary and grammar or skills that would otherwise be perceived as burdensome by the learners who request meaningfulness in their learning activities.

Though it might be claimed that this teaching approach is hardly ever adjustable to any other levels below the university level, the opposite is easy to be demonstrated. Dueñas (2004, 75) postulates that content-based teaching can be used 'as the medium of instruction for literature, history, mathematics, science, social studies, or any other academic subject at any educational context or level'. Consequently, the age and level of learners would not impede learning as content-based teaching starts from the content that a teacher wants to teach seconded immediately by the means that help teaching. Content adapts to age, level and interest of learners and linguistic means are adjusted to them.

For example, teaching Present Tense Simple for the sake of teaching it might trigger indifference from the learners who might feel overwhelmed by the quantity of information they need to remember about it, sometimes missing the point of why they should learn it. But, if learning begins from somebody's daily programme with repetitive actions that happen more or less often, learners associate frequent actions with Present Tense Simple. Although the change is not dramatic, the content is expressing daily or frequent activities which is done by means of Present Tense Simple verb forms. Teaching Present Tense Simple verb forms in isolation from context might reduce teaching impact and learning efficiency. It is also possible that further clarifications might be necessary for the students' being able to associate the use of the Present Tense Simple with frequent activities.

Teaching seasons, jobs, colours, school subjects, environment, people's physical and personality descriptions, cooking utensils or writing instruments expose students to knowledge which is interspersed with cultural information that leads to the students' developing a natural and internal urge to learn the language without the strenuous effort of understanding grammar categories that at the time may overpass their natural ability of learning. The authors of the article do not express their doubts about the benefits the study of grammar may induce in its learners. They only claim that grammar in isolation is likely to bear no fruit or at least under the level that is intended and expected. Grammar should not be an end in itself, it should help learners understand verbal behaviours in contexts where grammar adaptation is as important as vocabulary or pragmatic adaptation.

In secondary education (Wang et al. 1995, 319), topics are more advanced and allow of a diverse syllabus in conformity with the advances in their subject study. Dealing with topics on friendship, career, persons' mobility, dependencies, etc creates thriving contexts for practicing English and for associating various vocabulary and grammar items aiming at boosting the learners' English control. Integrating language, vocabulary, and the four skills in teaching English safeguards the role of English of a fundamental primer, a connector between subjects that would otherwise remain detached from the others. Though still young and unsure about their future careers, the adolescents find in English an ally for a holistic integrative teaching.

University is perhaps the place where the content is exploited to the maximum to the students' advantage as they do not feel that English is another subject, but it is their domain of interest in original texts, recordings, discussions where English is a tool, not an end. It is a tool by which they discover more about their domain, they interact with other speakers, they express their ideas and listen to people who are specialists in their field. An experience when they do not practice English for the sake of knowing it, but fully aware they practice it in contexts similar to real life when interaction in English is not a means to end and, but a fast way of solving work-related issues in international contexts. At this level, teaching English is a mixture of teaching 'content, communication, cognition, and culture' (Coyle 2006, 7), which suggests the complexity of the approach and the expectations that teachers need to live up to (Maldonado-García 2018, 11) in the sense that they know English, they are familiar with the rule of the language's functioning, but their knowledge of the system is reduced.

Though the advantages of the approach outweigh the disadvantages, it should be stated from the very beginning that no approach is perfect, but it is definitely perfectible. Integrative teaching is one of the approaches that has tried to solve teaching dilemmas and downsides of previous teaching approaches, though the results of the approach's implementation may not have always been successful as noticed by Swain (1998, 73) who reports that teacher's input, though important, is not at the level it is expected to be and the learners underdeliver, judging by the context in which they learn, which is anyway more than students deliver when other teaching approaches are used. Still, as Hinkel (2006: 109) acknowledges it, the abundance of teaching theories has an adverse effect on education which dilutes content to the point of becoming irrelevant. Against this gloomy background, integrated teaching is an approach which places learner's interests first and seeks solutions for achieving it.

Kemper et al. (2012, 8-9) developed a project which explained the connection between reading and writing and advised learners on how they should approach the tasks of reading and writing. As a strategy, they suggest that both

reading and writing have shared features that are necessary when developing both skills: subject, purpose, audience, type and role. Their sharing of the above features facilitates teaching and learning as the features are transferrable and repeatable in every new production. Tavil (2010, 765) identifies similarities in nature between listening and speaking focusing on the interaction that is fundamental in both skills. Jones (1996, 12) emphasizes the applicative character of both listening and speaking: 'In speaking and listening we tend to be getting something done, exploring ideas, working out some aspect of the world, or simply being together. In writing, we may be creating a record, committing events or moments to paper.'

#### 4. Integrated teaching structure

Long (1981, 263) gives prominence to a few keynote terms in the teaching process which impact the learners' output in terms of effectiveness and efficiency: the input, the instruction, the correction, and the feedback.

- *The input* does affect content-based teaching, but mostly learning because the quality of the selected materials will shape the result of the learning process. Original, interesting, and adequate materials, written or oral, sometimes adapted or abridged in order to respond to time constraints, to reduce redundancy or to modify the grammatical information so as to serve as teaching tool are chosen. The focus on originality (Berardo 2006, 60) emphasises the immersion into texts or videos created by natives, which lifts any suspicion of misappropriation of information and language use. Texts should also be interesting because they may respond to students' specialisations, and they are likely to be more attracted to them rather than to other materials that are far from their concerns.
- *The instruction* refers to the teaching approach which is learner and acquisition-oriented and which switches the focus from separate and hardly traceable language items to a comprehensive approach where the content is the focus of the instruction. Still, language is not ignored because regular communication, which is the focus, is and should be interspersed with what is called 'focus-on-form instruction' which Basturkmen et al. (2002, 2) define as providing 'learners with the opportunity to take 'timeout' from focusing on message construction to pay attention to specific forms and the meanings they realize'. They identify the benefits of this strategy and explain that it 'induces learners to notice linguistic forms in the input which may assist the process of their interlanguage development'.
- *Explicit correction* is a much-needed element of any act of education. In the case of content-based teaching, correction is hardly ever done by students, though that would be ideal to happen. Correction can be immediate or delayed, but it is

essential in order to give learning a chance to occur. Content-based teaching is not about the exclusion of language rules, it is about language rules within a content as it is produced by natives or specialists.

- *Implicit feedback* is equally vital in teaching as it confirms learners the correct acquisition and use of the language when getting immersed in an all-English context. Long or short, the necessity of the feedback is emphasized in this teaching approach as well by its confirmatory and learning strengthening power. The students' uttering 'non-target-like productions' (Oliver and Mackey's 2003, 519) entails a correction on the part of the teacher or corrective feedback, most often in the form of recasts (implicit feedback) or metalinguistic explanations (explicit feedback). Although the effectiveness of corrective feedback has been challenged or acknowledged, it is only commonsensical to admit that it bears positive results on condition the teacher and the learner negotiate, and the feedback is 'provided at the right point or within the learner's zone of proximal development' (Nassaji and Swain 2000, 36). Elis et al. (2006, 367) conclude, comparing the two types of feedback, that the explicit feedback is more likely to be understood by the learners since 'learners are consciously aware of and that is typically only available through controlled processing'.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has aimed at providing arguments in favour of the integrated teaching approach as it encourages an all-English teaching environment with learners' immersion in authentic materials that promote, beyond strict language and vocabulary or skill-oriented information, an engrossment into the culture and civilization of the foreign language that is being studied. The focus on the authentic materials is merely a whim since natively produced materials have all the necessary degree of complexity likely to challenge learners which might in the end lead to learning of ESP/ CLIL domain-related vocabulary. Embedding the teaching of grammar and vocabulary into tasks that have as main aim getting learners familiarized to their field counts as a re-ranking of priorities and of objectives in teaching English. Teaching a certain verb tense for the sake of knowing it is educationally inferior to teaching a type of situations to which a certain verbal tense should be used. Consequently, it is the context or the situation that imposes the use of a particular verb tens. This approach to teaching is more concerned about satisfying contextual communication necessities rather than fragmentary verb tenses information or vocabulary data.



Another objective of the article is to hearten an integrated approach when teaching skills as dealing with skills separately transforms certain skills into celebrities of the language and others into commoners bearing a direct impact on learners who will seek to acquire proficiency in certain skills like speaking and reading and to ignore writing and listening. Integrated teaching approach therefore tries to repair a downside which instilled into people's minds that the communicative approach is about improving communication seen as speaking. This is an explanation as to why developing the speaking skill is considered by some users of English as sufficient for the mastery of the language. The acquisition of transferrable knowledge between and across skills is encouraged since that facilitates teaching and learning, respectively.

Last but not least, the article pinpoints the importance of some vital pickets in teaching which majorly contribute not only to the achievement of the objectives of the activities, but also stand out as piers of knowledge by the connection they operate between the various elements that are taught during English classes.

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