

*Ludmyla Zharikova, the Senior Teacher
of the Chair of Languages and
Literature Teaching Techniques,
In-Service Teacher Training Institute,
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University*

Teaching Integrated Skills: a Path to Realistic Communication

According to the Concept of New Ukrainian School, communication in foreign language is one of the key competences for lifelong learning. Thus the main goal of teaching English is to give our students the opportunity to be successful in real communication. “Real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom” (Davies & Pearse, 2002: 99). Teachers have been studying the ways of enabling learners to use English freely, effectively, and as far as possible accurately, in realistic communication, which has become not only the major goal of all English language teaching, but also the students’ main concern when they make their efforts to study English. Traditional ELT tends to train the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing separately, and materials and activities designed usually focus on one specific skill while others are ignored. Undoubtedly, a separate focus on individual skills can play a useful role in accelerating students’ language learning if it is well taught. However, since integrated skills use coincides the way we communicate in real life, and integrating the skills can bring plenty of benefits to English teaching, it is a worthwhile experiment in a communicative classroom despite it is highly demanding for teachers.

Communicative competence in language teaching practice refers to the development of learners’ language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The goal of communicative language teaching is to develop students’ communicative competence, which includes both the knowledge about the language and the knowledge about how to use the language appropriately in

communicative situations. The ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is to enable the students to use the foreign language in work or life when necessary. We never use separate skills in our real life, that is why integrating the four skills emphasizes the focus on realistic language and can therefore lead to the students' all-round development of communicative competence in English. Moreover, there are other reasons why integration can benefit a communicative classroom. Firstly, integrating the skills allows a teacher to build in more variety into the lesson because the range of activities will be wider. Successful integrative approach may help a teacher to make the lessons dynamic, involving the learners in varied activities and interactions, which can create plenty of opportunities for students to participate in class and raise their motivation to learn English. Secondly, integration of skills satisfies students' different learning styles, as the extroverts may speak a lot, the introverts prefer to listen or read, and the analytically or visually oriented learners like to see how words are written and sentences constructed. Integrating skills helps the students to learn English willingly and comfortably. As a matter of fact, a vivid and effective communicative class is supposed to be the integration of the four language skills training, in which the teacher needs to establish a positive atmosphere, plan appropriate activities, encourage learners and deal with problems sensitively (Davies & Pearse, 2002: 99). According to Jing (2006), the importance of using Integrative Approach lies on the fact that, when facing a real communicative situation, "more than one skill is used to communicate and integrated skill approach provides opportunities to develop these skills at the same time." Hungyo & Kijai (2009) state that one of the advantages of using this approach is that teachers "can build the lesson plan around a theme or a topic based on the interest of learners and also on topics that are relevant to them," which contributes to make lessons more dynamic and engaging for learners, who participate in different kinds of activities and interaction. According to Oxford (2001), one of the most relevant advantages of using the Integrated-skill Approach is that it "exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language." She also

comments that exposing students to communicative situations helps them to get an idea of the “richness and complexity of the English language.” In recent decades the experts “have realized that by emphasizing what learners can do with the language, rather than using the forms of language, EFL instructors can incorporate any or all of the language skills that are relevant into the classroom arena.”

Hungyo & Kijai (2009) state that the “activities used by teachers in the integrated approach are real-life activities and situations and thus create an interactive learning environment.” In other words, when using the Integrated-skill Approach, teachers face their students with communicative situations that have to as real as possible so that students realize the importance of learning the foreign language.

Oxford (2001) states that there are two types of integrated-skill instruction which are Content-Based Language Instruction and Task-Based Instruction:

In Content-Based Instruction, students practice all the language skills in a highly integrated, communicative fashion while learning contents such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Content-based Language Instruction is valuable at all levels of proficiency, but the nature of the content might differ by proficiency level. For beginners, the content often involves basic social and interpersonal communication skills, but past the beginning level, the content can become increasingly academic and complex.

In Task-Based Instruction, students □ basic pair work and group work are often used to increase student interaction and collaboration. For instance, students work together to write and edit a class newspaper, develop a television commercial, enact scenes from a play, or take part in other joint tasks. More structured cooperative learning formats can also be used in task-based instruction. Task-based instruction is relevant to all levels of language proficiency, but the nature of the task varies from one level to the other.

According to Harmer (2007), productive work should not always be imitative. Students are greatly helped by being exposed to examples of writing and speaking which show certain conventions for them to draw upon. Harmer (2007) also states that skill integration is a major factor in lesson planning. Weaving threads of

different skills and topics is a major art of teachers who plan for a sequence of lessons. Skill integration also happens when students are involved in project work, which may well involve researching (through reading or listening), speaking (e. g .in discussions or when giving a presentation) and writing (e.g submitting a report).

Of course, using integrative approach in a communicative classroom requires more efforts from a teacher in choosing materials and designing activities in comparison with the traditional English teaching. Various Internet sites can be of a great help as they offer a wide range of lesson plans emphasizing integrative approach. What follows is an actual teaching plan offered by OnTESOL site that is used as an example of how the integration of the skills can be designed. (<http://esl-lesson-plans.ontesol.com/category/integrated-skills/>)

Lesson type: Listening comprehension integrating vocabulary, speaking and writing skills.

Aids: Authentic material (audio recording of newspaper article): ‘Swim with dolphins to reduce stress’ (see transcript below); pictures of nature and animals; handouts with the vocabulary exercises; handouts with the listening comprehension activities; blackboard.

Source: bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/331/7527/1231

Article: Swim With Dolphins To Reduce Stress

A newly published study conducted in Honduras reports that swimming with dolphins helps alleviate stress and lifts depression. Researchers from Leicester University in England found that patients suffering from depression became happier after they swam with dolphins. Time spent in the water with the aquatic creatures led to falling levels of depressive symptoms in 15 patients diagnosed with mild or moderate depression. None of the participants took antidepressants or had psychotherapy for four weeks before taking part in the study. Researchers reported a noticeable lifting of depression after just two weeks of the dolphin therapy. They say this supports the theory of biophilia – or how human well-being is dependent on interacting with the natural environment.

The study entailed observing two groups of patients – one played with dolphins,

the other simply swam alone in a pool. The dolphin therapy lifted depression considerably quicker than is the norm for counseling sessions: Researchers said: “Depressive symptoms improved after two weeks....In conventional therapy – psychotherapy or drug therapy – symptoms usually improve substantially after four weeks.” Researcher Michael Reveley attributed this to positive therapeutic feelings created by playing with dolphins. He said the creatures are “highly intelligent animals who are capable of complex interactions, and regard humans positively.” He also said animals could be used to treat other psychiatric illnesses. He added: “We need to remember that we are part of the natural world, and interacting with it can have a beneficial effect on us.”

I. Presentation stage

Aim: Speaking skill: Create interest in the topic using discussion and the personalization technique. Pre-teach and practice vocabulary through matching and comprehension exercise.

Interactive patterns: T-S, SS

Time: Approx. 30min

Aids: Handouts with vocabulary exercises, blackboard.

Procedure:

Step 1: Speaking skill – Discussion and personalization

Teacher asks the following questions of the students to facilitate short discussions.

- a. Do you find that your fast-paced lifestyle in the city makes you stressed?
- b. How often and in what ways do you interact with the natural environment?
- c. Do you think that animals can help us to feel good? Could animals be useful in treating mental illness?
- d. How do the following animals make you feel: dolphin, dog, horse, rabbit, kitten?
- e. Imagine swimming with a dolphin in a tropical paradise. Would you like to do this and how do you think this would make you feel?

Step 2: Vocabulary

Students work in pairs to match up the new vocabulary words with the scrambled

definitions alongside on the handout. They should be familiar with some of the words and should be able to complete the exercise through the process of elimination. After the exercise, go over the answers and ensure that everyone understands the meaning of each word.

Answer key:

conduct - carry out

alleviate - to make something less painful, severe or serious

depression - a feeling of extreme unhappiness and gloom

aquatic - of, in or related to water

symptom - a sign or indication of something

diagnose - to determine the cause and nature of a problem from examining the symptoms

moderate - neither very great or very small in size, amount, strength or degree

well-being - a good or satisfactory state of existence, characterized by such things as health and happiness

entailed - involved

therapy - a form of treatment for an illness or medical condition

session - a period of time used for a particular activity

conventional - of the usual, traditional, accepted type instead of being new and different

substantially - by a large amount or degree

attributed - to believe that something is the result of a particular situation, event or action

psychiatric - relating to mental illness

Step 3: Checking comprehension of vocabulary and practicing pronunciation.

Remove the previous exercise from the students and write a list of the new vocabulary words on the blackboard. Get students to individually complete the following vocabulary exercise by inserting the correct word. Check answers and model each new vocabulary word, getting the students to chorally drill pronunciation thereof.

(Answer key in brackets)

- a. After examining her, the doctorMary with influenza (symptoms; diagnosed)
- b. She suffered a lot from.....after the death of her husband. (depression)
- c. As he could not make it in person, the interview was.....by phone. (conducted)
- d. You can cook meat either in a microwave or in aoven. (conventional)
- e. Since completing her degree, landing her dream job and finding true love, Sally's.....has improved..... . (wellbeing; substantially)
- f. Successhard work and determination. (entails)
- g. During our trip to the seaside, we saw many.....birds. (aquatic)
- h. A question-and-answer.....will be held after the class. (session)
- i. His teacher.....his learning difficulties to emotional problems he was having. (attributed)
- j. After trying every other type of.....for her mental illness, she was admitted to a.....hospital. (therapy; psychiatric)
- k. The doctor prescribed some medication to.....Tom's pain. He stopped taking the medication after a week as his pain was now only..... . (alleviate; moderate)

II. Practice stage:

Aims: Listening comprehension: Listening for the gist and listening for specific information (scanning).

Time: Approx. 25min

Interactive patterns: S

Aids: Audio tape of the newspaper article, handouts with the 3 listening tasks.

Procedure:

Step 1: Listening for the gist and answer the following questions.

Provide students with the handout with the listening tasks and allow them to read

through them. Tell them that they will listen to the tape to find the answers to the questions in the first and second activity.

1. What animals were used in the study?
2. What was the general finding of the study?
3. Can it be beneficial for humans to interact with animals and the natural environment?

Play the tape again if the students weren't able to answer the questions with certainty.

Answers:

1. Dolphins
2. That swimming with dolphins helps to reduce depression.
3. Yes.

Step 2: Listening for specific information (scanning) – True / false statements.

Say whether the following statements are true or false.

1. The depressive symptoms in 12 of the patients diagnosed with depression decreased.
2. No antidepressants were taken by the patients in the lead up to the dolphin therapy.
3. The study suggests human wellbeing is intertwined with nature.
4. Depressive symptoms disappeared overnight after dolphin therapy.
5. Dolphins generally regard humans with suspicion.
6. A researcher recommends using animals to treat psychiatric illnesses.

Play the tape again if the students weren't able to answer with certainty.

Answers:

1. F (15 patients)
2. T
3. T
4. F (improved after 2 weeks)

5. F (dolphins regard humans positively)

6. T

Step 3: Listening for specific information – Listening for mistakes.

Provide the students with the handout of the following sentences from the article.

Instruct them to listen to the article, underlining any words which are inconsistent with the article and writing the correct word in its place. Check answers.

1. A newly published study conducted in Havana reports that swimming with dolphins helps alleviate stress and lowers depression.

2. Time spent in the water with the aquatic animals led to falling levels of depressive symptoms.

3. They say this refutes the theory of biophilia.

4. The study entailed observing three groups of patients.

5. In normal therapy-psychotherapy or drug therapy-symptoms always improve substantially after four weeks.

6. Michael Revely attributed this to positive therapeutic emotions created by playing with dolphins.

7. Interacting with it can have a positive effect on us.

III. Production stage:

Aim: Writing skills: summarizing the article. Speaking skills: discussion

Interactive pattern: S; SS; SSS

Time: Approx. 35min

Aids: Board

Procedure:

Step 1: Writing and speaking skill – Summarizing

Have the students summarize the newspaper article in as much detail as they can remember. After this, have them work in pairs to compare what they have written and to check what details they have omitted.

Step 2: Speaking skill – Group discussion

Divide the students into groups of 3 or 4 and get them to discuss their opinions of the contents of the article. Tell them to discuss the following points written up on the blackboard:

- Their opinions on human well-being being dependent on interactions with the natural world.
- Relate personal accounts of how their moods or stress levels are affected by being in nature.
- Their opinions on the use of conventional therapy, such as drugs, versus animal/natural/alternative therapies.
- Do they have any personal stories or know of any situations in which animal interactions have been beneficial.

To sum up, using integrative approach can help a teacher create a relaxed atmosphere in his or her class that students' all-round abilities are well improved. A combination of activities involving different skills enhances the focus on realistic communication, which makes the students be more motivated and more involved and engaged enthusiastically in classroom activities. Integration of the skills accustoms the learners to combining listening and speaking in real time, in natural interaction. Students are given opportunities to do as many speaking activities as possible in pairs and groups, so they may be less frightened of speaking in front of the rest of the class. Moreover, students give better performance in writing after doing sufficient related activities. However, integration is also demanding of teachers. It may take teachers more time to find or design suitable materials. Timing the activities precisely and organizing the classroom flexibly is of considerable importance as well. Besides, the limited time and large class size may be negative factors affecting the integrative teaching. Teachers may be also skillful at balancing the integrating of the skills and focusing on individual language skill training. However, these challenges should not prevent teacher from attempting the integration in English teaching because it can bring worthwhile result visible both to the teacher and to the students.

References

1. Davies, P. & Pearse, E. (2002). Success in English Teaching, Oxford University Press.
2. Hadfield, Jill & Charles. (2008) Introduction to teaching English. Oxford University Press.
3. Harmer, Jeremy. (2007) How to teach English. Pearson Education Limited. Essex, England
4. Harmer, Jeremy. (2007) The Practice of English Language Teaching. Pearson Education Limited. Essex, England.
5. Hungyo, Josephine and Kijai, Jimmy. (2009) The effect of integrated and Segregated Skills Approach on English Language acquisition among Freshmen Nursing and Business Students in Mission College Tailand. The Scriptor, Journal of Arts & Humanities Department. Thailand.
6. Oxford, Rebecca. (2001) Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL Classroom. ESL Magazine, Vol. 6, n° 1, January/February 2001.