
Exploring Practical and Theoretical Issues in Teaching Language Skills: Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing.

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Abstract

Teaching language skills is usually the main element or focus of the practice of teaching foreign languages. There are several teaching and education programs in global universities aimed at imparting practical and theoretical knowledge of teaching productive (writing and speaking) and receptive (reading and listening) skills in English. Many teachers preserve this skill and usually want to learn more to develop more pedagogical approaches to guide their potential and current students to learn English. As the English language is dynamic, the practices and principles of teaching those skills are also dynamic. This study is an introductory discussion that explores some of the major practical and theoretical details in teaching speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills, which are chosen deliberately to reflect how language learning takes place in natural communication in the real world. Along with giving a complete review of studies, this study is also aimed to echo some of the existing “strands of theoretical thinking on the topic and to complement” such concepts with the way skills are taught in various contexts and programs with the contribution of several researchers.

Keywords: Education programs, English language, Language learning, Language skills, Teaching foreign language.

Introduction

There are four macro skills to teach any language and most English teachers worldwide have recognized its widely used concept as it has come a long way to conceptualize and categorize the core aspects of communication and to name and label how teaching language is assessed and designed in several institutional contexts. Readers might be much familiar with labels like “academic writing”, “conversation”, “listening skills” or “reading comprehension” to describe courses and classes focusing and segregating on a special area of language skills. In addition, language is usually assessed as a specific skill as in “The test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)” and “The International English Language Testing System (IELTS)” or standard formats like “The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)”, which is widely adopted across the world. In language teaching, there are also several practical and theoretical publications based on one or all of the four skills (Siegel, 2015; Goh & Burns, 2012).

It should be understood that a lot of recent contests of thinking about the concept of segregation and separation of 4 skills on a self-evident basis are based on the belief that communication doesn't happen that “way in the real world. One just has to do daily jobs like interacting with coworkers or friends, using social media, getting some transactions done at a bank, running errands, etc. where writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills are employed and connected dynamically to know the artificial divisions. Apart from the segregation in individual skills in teaching language, one of the most common moves is the widespread belief that reading and listening may be collectively described as receptive skills while writing and speaking are usually considered as productive skills” (Scrivener, 2012; Harmer, 2015).

The reciprocal skills interrelate in real use and must be measured as interconnected and complementary in teaching secondary language, which is another idea of reading-writing and listening-speaking (Nation & Newton, 2009; Nation, 2009; Newton, 2016; Hirvela, 2013; Grabe & Zhang, 2013). Reading and writing in the past were often called “passive skills” and writing and

speaking were known as “active skills”. These days, all skills are considered “active” as they need various types of social and cognitive processes used in various manners (Richards & Burns, 2012).

The view that “teaching writing, reading, speaking, and listening must be combined is even more significant (Hinkel, 2006, 2010). This concept is not entirely new and it may look revolutionary in some aspects of teaching language skills (Nation & Newton, 2009). Since 1978, considering the discourse-based perception of communication and language, Widdowson argued regarding the integration of teaching skills, especially for particular purposes in the case of English. This view was headed by the “situational approach” which had characterized previous teaching methods from the 1950s and 1970s, which had recommended teaching all four skills, even though speaking is the main focus (Hinkel, 2010).

Real-world contexts have been highlighted in the situational approach, for example, “at the restaurant” or “at the post office” where functional language could be taught and identified for specific purposes. This approach was supported by the “Presentation-practice-production (PPP)” teaching model, which is still relevant in a lot of classrooms across the world. Since the late 1970s, the emergence of teaching communicative language transformed the major focus on language which is learned after the function to one where use and meaning must be the key drivers to adopt new learning to be transferred to the world ahead of the classroom.

It has set the scene for a challenge to the idea of separate teaching of language skills while focusing on pattern drills from the view of norms of native speakers which still survives to date. For seeking sensible production of language and integrating skills, more recent insight into arguments is the move to achieve task-based learning and teaching (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). There are both pros and cons of integration (Rost & Wilson, 2013). It enables various skills for interaction to promote the acquisition of language and meet the preferences and learning styles of students. It relieves the focus and variety on only one skill. Meanwhile, non-integration may lead to a higher depth of learning and

integrity, while focusing on a skill where there is a weakness of learners and more focused attention is needed in areas like vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and accuracy (Hinkel, 2010).

Teaching four Language Skills

There have been significant advancements in understanding strategies, skills, knowledge, processes, and products characteristic of various skill sets. Here, there is a scope to touch on some of the key findings and implications of some of the main findings.

1. Teaching Listening Skills

As compared to writing, reading, and speaking, the benefits of focusing on listening skills have always been neglected in teaching materials and language teaching (Vandergrift and Goh 2012), as it is likely to be assumed that when learners listen widely while doing it with osmosis (Richards & Burns, 2012; Cauldwell, 2013). There is a need to pay attention to both bottom-up and top-down “listening speech perception processes” (Newton, 2009). With importance of “top-down listening”, bottom-up listening is significant (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2010). Bottom-up listening needs considerable attention over the years. Top-down processes refer to earlier experiences and contextual/global knowledge which enable listener to infer the meanings and overall messages of familiarity and incoming speech in order to structure the language in various aspects of discourse. On the other hand, bottom-up processes are related to constant stream of speech for the listener, such as word boundaries, sounds, reduced prosody and forms, associated elements, or patterns of intonation and stress (Lynch and Mendelsohn 2010).

Skilled listening is more than segmented segmenting the stream of speech successfully (Newton, 2016). Learning to listen in a foreign language consists of skilled orchestration of cognitive and metacognitive strategies”. A lot of attention has been given to developing cognitive and metacognitive strategies over the past two decades (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Metacognitive strategies consist of thinking about managing listening skills and processes with planning, paying selective, focused

attention, monitoring comprehension of specific language features, and checking and evaluating interpretations. On the other hand, cognitive strategies are specified for thinking which consists of inferencing and predicting, elaborating, and contextualizing, transferring, summarizing, and translating.

According to Field (2008), learners should identify the right answers to questions related to comprehension when witnessing a “comprehension approach” for teaching listening skills. This approach is compared to testing listening skills instead of teaching listening as it needs students to memorize instead of respond to and interpret incoming data. A diagnostic approach is recommended with listening, pre-listening, and post-listening where in-depth micro-listening is based on bottom-up processing to fill the gaps in understanding information by the learners after hearing. Teaching should be based on various kinds of listening where learners can be both participants and listeners (Richards & Burns, 2012; Lynch and Mendelsohn 2010). In movie monologues or any way of one-way listening, the listener has a “transfer-of-information” or “transactional” role. The listener covers “two-way” or more ways of listening as an “interactional role and is covered in “exchange-of-information” where speaking and listening are reciprocal”. In addition, both authentic (improvising, interviewing, extensive listening) and pedagogic (comprehension, dictation, dictogloss) tasks and several listening experiences like affective, social, cross-cultural, strategic, critical, intertextual, and contextualized are involved (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

2. Teaching Speaking Skills

Speaking is an interactive and very complex skill that often provokes anxiety among students learning a foreign language (Woodrow, 2006). For “L2 learners with limited knowledge about vocabulary, grammar, and phonology, there is a significant gap (Thornbury, 2012). Additionally, speaking is a very dynamic skill as learners should be capable of producing language on the go without reflection and planning with other skills, especially writing and reading. Apart from learning linguistic aspects of language, speakers have to combine fluency, accuracy, and complexity in a way to meet heavy

processing needs to talk spontaneously. According to Goh & Burns (2012), speaking is a combinatorial language skill”. For having competency in speaking, learners should gain knowledge of genres and language systems of discourse, along with core skills of communication strategies and speech production to negotiate and manage constant communication (Thornbury, 2012).

Knowing language systems consists of knowledge of intonation patterns and sounds enabling intelligible exchanges between listener and speaker, grammatical structures that combine utterances and vocabulary (multiple and separate word units) which carry message contents (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2010). Additionally, speakers should understand the flow of discourse with social and cultural patterns helping them to anticipate the kinds of events they are going through to come up with sensible exchanges among others. They should also understand the intercultural and pragmatic use of speech in a way to respond in the best ways and engage in speakers and encounters effectively in various cultures. Knowledge has been very vital in a globalized and “interconnected world where English is a universal language (Seidlhofer, 2011).

Excellent speakers should also have skills to come up with fluent speech, associated with speech rate, number of pauses between utterances and syllables, and articulation, along with speech that is widely accurate for intelligibility and comprehensibility. In addition, speakers must handle interactive speech constantly by knowing when to take turns, how to seek clarifications, how to develop based on earlier utterances, and how to fix communication breakdowns. In the end, speakers should keep the flow of speech going with communicative strategies and compensate for gaps in communication skills and linguistic knowledge. Strategies can be used by speakers like looking for ways to paraphrase, express meaning, and avoid some of the messages at the same time.

Methods to speak instruction are usually heterogeneous, for example, using combinations of information gap, drills, role plays, and informal discussions (Thornbury, 2012)”. However, a more systematic “3-tier” approach is recommended to speak, which consists of “sociocultural theory” and “cognitive skill learning theory”, including appropriation (practicing and rehearsing specific

features), awareness-based (informing students about features of speech), and autonomy (doing various spoken genres). A “holistic” approach is recommended by Goh & Burns (2012) that is known as “teaching-speaking cycle”, which has 7 steps – “giving guided input and planning, giving attention to speaking, speaking tasks, focusing on strategies, discourse, and strategies, promoting reflection on performance, repeating speaking tasks, and promoting feedback on learning”.

3. Teaching Reading Skills

Reading is usually perceived as an introductory skill for successful learning (Janzen, 2007; Carrell & Grabe, 2010), as it often lies between “learning to read” and “reading to learn”. The process of “learning to read” consists of “mastery in both top-down and bottom-up skills”. When developing such skills, students should play 4 reader roles in the process to move ahead and be skilled and competent readers (Freebody & Luke, 2003). Bottom-up and top-down skills consist of “text participant” (with personal experiences and background to add meaning to text) and “code breaker” (to decode graphics and symbols). However, recent advancements have understood that reading is both a sociocultural and cognitive (top-down/bottom-up) process. There are two other reader roles added by Freebody and Luke (2003) – “text analyst” (thinking critically about the text messages, identifying ideologies behind or biases, and developing personal interpretations) and “text user” (understanding the social and cultural purpose of the text and using the text).

Reading is not usually improved just by reading multiple texts. Readers develop cognitive (scanning, reading, and skimming for gist) and metacognitive (thinking how to read text, planning “what one knows about comprehension, content, and determining progress on understanding) strategies. Teachers may focus completely on using those strategies to give confidence to students in reading and to help them improve their use in the classroom. Recent methods have focused on the value of differentiating whether L2 readers have problems in reading or writing for developing reading.

It is possible to help learners improve vocabulary to deal with learning challenges in reading (Nation, 2015), along with the smart use of dictionaries when needed (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Reading development can be improved significantly with in-depth reading, where students have a particular goal for learning in mind while focusing on the skill for development and extensive reading which also helps in reading where students choose texts for fun and read them as properly as possible both outside and within the class (Day, 2015). There is a rise in interest in reading pedagogy in using extensive and intensive reading as a combined method (Day, 2015)". Teachers should also consider fluency which is vital to reading and speaking. To improve vocabulary, general acquisition, and reading rate, reading aloud, modeling, choral reading, constant reading, and readers' theatre and partner reading are the aspects where students perform a play while reading scripts that improve fluency in reading.

4. Teaching Writing Skills

Like reading, writing is an important skill to achieve academic success. It consists of a complex blend of textual and linguistic knowledge along with sociocultural awareness and strategic knowledge. Many writers face the problem of knowing the way to change their form of writing from language spoken to more formal needs of writing in terms of linguistic knowledge, both while "writing in first and second language. Writing is not just a matter of writing a speech (McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Biber et al., 1999).

Thornbury (2012) focuses on variations across writing and speech and how they structure the flow of information in different ways and syntactic and rhetorical aspects of lexical and grammatical systems. When it comes to conceptualize the changes, a useful concept that takes place across written and spoken language is the "mode continuum" which displays how the use of language in various written and spoken contexts affects the form of language (Derewianka, 2014; Burns, 2016). Teachers can rely on the "mode continuum" concept to scaffold the writing skills of their learners for more formal discourse and to teach the importance of features to the learners like nominalization and internal

reference in writing. It is also important to understand the macro features of discourse for successful research and writing in genre theory, which has played a vital role in knowing how non-fictional (like discussion, essay, etc.) and fictional (dramatic script, poetry, and narrative) texts are built rhetorically. Learners can easily handle the flow of arguments in the entire text by understanding the schemes of genres.

Genre and linguistic knowledge are based on the products of writing. Research, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, has investigated the composing techniques of writers and their strategies for the cognitive processes used by successful writers to create, review, plan, revise, edit, and reread texts. This study has helped in the significant adoption of process writing, which is a pedagogical approach, that has drawn a lot of attention to the self-discovery of learners on creativity and fluency as created with various drafts of conferencing and writing with peers and teachers to seek feedback. One impact of this approach was that teaching has always been focused on the quality of the product” as it overlooked accurate fluency and caused a false dichotomy between teaching and process (Reid, 2001).

International Perspectives and Innovation

Teaching macro language skills worldwide permeates almost any kind of program of English Language offered worldwide and is pervasive (Hinkel, 2010). Illustrating this diversity is one of the major goals of this review paper. Readers will “notice that the range of contributions in all education sectors include courses designed for overall development of skills in English and those for academic, specific or vocational purposes. Additionally, the authors come from different continents give a bigger picture of major concerns in teaching of all four language skills.

Though the chapters are focused on ideas and practice, there is also need to find out how practice was covered in research, especially in research related to local practitioners. For the collection, another intention is to show how global ideas might be experimented with research which seeks to meet the

needs of specific contexts of teaching. Contributors can also submit samples of their work which could be innovative or with implications in their specific contexts of teaching”. A lot of themes can be brought on this aspect.

Future Directions

There has been a significant change in discussing the provision of language skills over the past decade. There is a lack of proper translation of pedagogical approaches in a classroom environment. When it comes to teaching speaking skills, the level of interactional approach has been adopted or can be adapted for the classroom. This aspect is still not researched well. Further studies can also describe a syllabus or program to teach speaking skills and their efficiency to help students improve speaking. There are several concerns worth considering for teaching listening skills to expose students to different types of English (spoken globally).

Experts believe that teachers shouldn't follow or accept suggestions of linguistics passively for teaching the English language. They have to contextualize teaching any language skill by considering the sociocultural background, needs for learning language, expertise level, and sociolinguistic reality of students. It shouldn't devalue the experience and knowledge of practitioners. Hence, future studies can focus on teaching reading needs from practitioners who should perform their research for pedagogical practices and principles.

Even though several approaches have been discussed, they still exert an effect on the way language speaking skills are taught and their extent has been adopted for teaching speaking skills around cultures. English still has been under research and inaudible. When it comes to changing sociolinguistic reality, the most recent suggestion to teach speaking skills is an interactional method to teach speaking skills. Understanding English as a “lingua franca” movement, pragmatics and some pedagogical methods have been discussed.

Along with intercultural pragmatics, lingua franca, and some pedagogical methods discussed earlier, the interactional approach for teaching speaking skills focuses on the need to expose students to interactions in the English language between various users in international English settings. They must be equipped with metalanguage to explain and describe their interactional and own strategies and improve their awareness of their interactional behaviours. Even though the listening pedagogy has gone away from only attention to linguistic segments of comprehension to metacognitive way, observations of several classrooms have shown the use of both methods by teachers teaching the English language to reflect on real-world listening.

However, some studies have observed that these methods are not widely effective in helping in better listening of students. Students relying and focusing on linguistic aspects often don't listen properly as sociocultural and contextual cues are overlooked. Those applying such knowledge used to neglect the input. Various studies have recommended approaching listening skills as both acquisition and comprehension. The discourse/social perspective of reading promotes conceptualization of reading. Reading enacts a shifting and complex set of dispositions, identities, and stances which makes it a matter of interpretation as conceived traditionally (Wallace, 2012).

These days, readers of English language belong to various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and are, hence, likely to bring their cultural expectations, life experiences, ideology, and several cultural, social, linguistic, professional, and personal identities while engaging in reading. Texts are shaped ideologically and socio-culturally. A lot of textbooks in "English Language Teaching (ELT)" are published in inner-circle nations and usually show the values that are not well aligned with the backgrounds of students and consist of various semantic phrases they don't know (McKay & Brown, 2016).

As they read the texts, they engage in constructing identities and choose either to read "against the grain" or assimilate into what is written. To problematize texts and identify maintenance to benefit specific groups of readers and marginalize other groups, the discourse/social perspective claims that

readers should learn to be critical readers instead of strategic ones. Using a critical discourse pedagogically draws on linguistic tools offered by systematic functional grammar by Halliday to unpack the impartiality of texts.

Conclusion

Even though a recent review on teaching writing skills has observed that teaching writing skills has been changed to transformation from transmission, from static kind of literacy to plurality, from a one-size-fits-all approach to contextual learning, the rhetoric practices don't match the real classroom practices. Hence, further research is needed to unpack and explore this mismatch. Secondly, one of the major implications in the globalization of English is that English belongs to all users. Hence, students must be engaged by teaching writing to own their writing and go ahead emulating rhetorical varieties in the circle by fixing and tracking grammatical errors.

Students should have a space to choose how they can make the most of their plurilingual resources, cultural capital, and knowledge of texts in a meaningful way that is comprehensible to their audience. Third, everyone cannot choose to conceptualize the change as diversity. It may be perceived as a deficiency. Hence, English teachers must unpack the uneven power relations covered in text production, texts, and writing pedagogical approaches. Further research must be conducted on writing skills to explore the political sides of teaching writing skills, instead of merely teaching grammar, structure, writing, and lexis or showing cultural changes in written texts.

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