

Moreland University – M26U1A2 Discussion Questions

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Based on the reading and your personal language teaching/learning experiences, what do you believe are the strengths and challenges of an integrated skills approach to language instruction?

As I began research on the question of integrated skills versus discrete skills, an initial confusion that arose was with regards to what discrete skills actually means. How could you possibly have a class in which you are practicing only one skill? It is likely that in any class you will be listening to the teacher and classmates at some point and will likely be discussing answers with classmates or asking the teacher a question. That is already speaking and listening both included. As soon as you have written forms of questions included in the class, that you will need to write answers to, we are quickly at all four skills.

Aponte-de-Hanna (2015) says “‘Discrete’ means the focus is on one skill, without completely getting rid of the others.” This is a point I fully agree with. Cecilia Aponte-de-Hanna describes some scenarios in which incorporating other skills into a discrete skills context causes challenge from others. “‘Why are you asking students to discuss their ideas with each other? They are supposed to be writing – not talking!’” said the person in charge.”, she gives as one example. Other examples are similar. As Pardede (2019) and Rahman and Akhter (2017) both note in their literature reviews, coming from much research, one of the often pointed out negatives of discrete skills teaching is that it is less communicative in nature and doesn’t really prepare students to use the language naturally and authentically in real-life. However, Aponte-de-Hanna (2015), along with my reflections on my own experience made me realize that it is not so much about discrete skills teaching specifically, but more the overall nature of the teaching approach and how natural and real-world it is made.

If other skills are avoided at all costs, with for example, students allowed to speak less than what is natural or much speaking and listening done in the native language, during a reading or writing class, then this is less natural.

If, however, we think of discrete skills teaching as being such that only one skill is being stretched, developed and put out of the comfort zone: the objectives of the lesson focus on one skill. For example, perhaps it is a reading class, and the focus is on comprehending and working with a reading text just above the student’s level. During the class, students would practice listening to listen to the teacher’s instruction, and practice speaking and listening together to discuss ideas with the teacher and peers. They might have to write short answers to comprehension questions on the text. In this class, all four key skills are practiced, but the speaking, listening and writing requirements, may all be well within the comfort zone of the students, so it is only reading comprehension that is challenged and stretched. It is hence a discrete skills class. If however, as part of the class, the students need to write a longer essay response to a question related to the reading text, or give a presentation arguing a point related to the text, then writing and speaking respectively may be challenged, in which case, the class goes into the realm of integrated.

In the lesson plans I wrote together with cohort members, Aleks and Jasen, we focused on word problems within Grade 4 math for a class of ESL students. In our discrete skills lesson plan, all skills were used throughout the class. Students listened to the teacher and discussed and wrote answers. However, only reading comprehension was stretched, through the comprehension of the questions. When you include writing or clearly articulating questions to each other, other skills get challenged and it becomes integrated.

Rahman and Akhter (2017) note “in case of the textbooks, a particular skill might be highlighted, but other language skills are used nevertheless through the activities presented in the book.” Oxford (2001) also argues that all skills will still be used, not matter what the key focus of the class. In my own teaching, I do my best to keep classes natural, with natural communication, just as I would if I were teaching students in their own language, and multiple skills will be used in light of this, even if only one skill is being stretched. Thinking about all the other teacher’s I have met in my career, I am not along here. I will think of discrete skills lessons in this way.

An interesting point to note is that thinking of it like this, really, discrete skills contexts do map use of the language in real life. As many of us go through our day in real life, at many points, we are only working with one or possibly two skills. As we talk to our family in the morning, it is speaking and listening, perhaps a bigger focus on one. If we are writing a report or presentation when we get to work, we are primarily focusing on writing. If later, we give a presentation, it is speaking. Then perhaps, we are reading through information related to our project, and it is reading. In the evening, we may be watching television, and it is listening. It varies depending on our lifestyle, but for many of us, it may only be at very dynamic times, for example during a busy time in the work day, that we are stretching multiple of the skills at the same time or switching between them continuously and very quickly.

Hence, we can’t necessarily say that integrated skills should be the stand along choice in regard to preparing for real world use. It is much more about how natural an environment is created in the class. Even an integrated skills class, stretching multiple skills, could be ineffective in preparing students for the real use of the language, if the class is overly structured, teacher driven, and unrelatable, without time for free use of the language.

This way of thinking considered, there do still exist some strengths of integrated skills-based teaching. In the description of Carols (1990, pp. 73-74) five advantages of integrated skills teaching, Pardede (2019) notes “skills integration provides continuity in teaching-learning/program because in this approach tasks are closely related to each other”. Integrating skills most certainly allows a topic to be explored naturally and in depth. Completing task related to each of the four key skills will also help deepen knowledge of the topic. I have done much work teaching the Oxford Discover series. Through this, I have seen how studying real world topics increases motivation in students and allows for deeper thinking in the second language. It is conceptual learning. Each unit in the book have multiple activities, including speaking practice, readers and writing, so that all skills will regularly be stretched and practiced in one class. Thinking skills, ideas regarding the topic, and all language skills are developed, with the different language skills supporting each other to increase the first two. It is a double win.

With some of my current students, I am working through books containing reading articles. These will often be on deep topics, including science, space and archaeology. Much new language will be introduced, including difficult words and sentences forms. Although this is primarily a reading skills book, as well as discussing it with students, I have guided them to give their own oral summary or presentation of key concepts later, followed by a similar writing piece. By the time we get to the writing, I have found the students making their arguments while using the new language related to the topic with confidence and competence. As well as the increasing the skills and knowledge of topics, integrated skills supports language itself to be developed, as “it allows for the recycling and revision of language” as Pardede (2019) again states in the description of Carols (1990, pp. 73-74) five advantages of integrated skills teaching. It also “brings variety into the classroom” as Pardede (2019) in the summary of the seven advantages outlined in Kebede (2013).

This idea of the different skills supporting each other, we can see at all ages and contexts. Working with my early years students, I have recently been incorporating the stretching of reading and speaking at the same

time, as we have read longer sentences to then have as models for practicing making our own sentences. Using the reading through referring to the written form can be used as a prompt to support the speaking, while awareness of the language and sentence structure can in turn support the reading.

We have noted already, concept-based learning. Task-based learning, the other approach to integrated skills, involving completing projects and tasks allows for the practice of multiple skills in a very natural and authentic situation.

The final advantage I note, comes specifically from the above reflection that often we will be stretching skills discretely in real-life. While this is the case, we are often limited with time in the ESL classroom. Integrating skills allows for greater efficiency as multiple skills can be practiced in a smaller number of classes.

What then are some of the challenges?

A first is related to the final strength above. While integrating skills practice can allow for efficiency, in some contexts there might also not be the time to make it work. When teaching writing for example, while I have always begun with spoken discussions, there have often been times when I have wanted to take these further to practice more detailed spoken expression and presentation, but in order to allow time for the writing, there has not been time to do so. Similarly, too, when working on a difficult reading text, there has not been as much time as I would like to practice speaking. Kebede (2013) indeed notes that factors relating to the school can make it difficult for integrated skills to be learning. Indeed, the academic context and expectations need to allow for the time, space and resources for integrated skills to be implemented.

For a second, Frazee (1995) and Shai (2016) both note that it is not easy for teachers to integrate skills effectively, especially when course materials may often only focus on one skill at a time. Even with several years of experience, I would still find it difficult to consider effective ways to practice speaking related to a reading text, so that it is relevant, and understanding of the reading text is built, and both skills are practiced. It is something that will require continuous professional development.

Kebede (2013), also notes student factors which can make implementation of integrated skills challenging. It is true, integrated skills is rigorous and requires an efficient and dynamic routine, which would require motivated and engaged students to implement with less challenge.

How do these strengths and challenges compare to those of a discrete based approach?

We go back now then to the discrete approach.

We have already seen that if we think of the discrete based approach as simply meaning that one skill is stretched and challenged, but likely multiple are used, and natural communication is still practiced, possible criticisms are fewer.

We have already noted above that actually many real-life situations do only stretch and focus on one skill. One might be the writing of a report. Another might be giving of a presentation (speaking). A third might be reading for a range of purposes, including pleasure and for learning. A discrete skills approach will allow such situations to be practiced, and tasks replicated.

A second strength is that it also allows longer, more detailed and more focused practice of difficult tasks. International TEFL Academy (2011) notes that certain skills and in certain situations will need practice. One might be the listening required to follow a business meeting, or a university lecture in the subject. These may need focused time, so can be the principle focus of one or more classes, with practice activities replicating the parts of the task itself.

At many levels going back to our time factor again, it will often be the case that it is more important to focus on one skill if tasks are challenging, or if specific work wants to be done to support students here.

With regards to challenges, with only one skill, discrete skills may be less challenging to implement than continuous skills. The difficulties are still the same as for any area of teaching – delivering in the most accessible way to students. If one skill is only being focused on, even necessarily, it is important to remember to always work to make the class as communicatively natural as possible.

Comparing the strengths and challenges then, we see that a big strength is that both can prepare students for natural use of the language in different situations – discrete skills for situations in which only one is needed, and integrated, for situations in which multiple is needed. Discrete skills learning can help students work on a specific challenging area, whereas in integrated, the different skills can support and complement each other and have particular benefits in studying a topic. Both have challenges in implementing them in the way most beneficial for students, with integrated skills having perhaps bigger challenges in making it work in both time and with the resources available. Over time, the two should generally be balanced to give students the different supports learning opportunities beneficial.

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