
Halina Chodkiewicz

Akademia Bialska Nauk Stosowanych im. Jana Pawła II

INTEGRATING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: FROM A TRADITIONAL TO AN ONLINE PERSPECTIVE

**INTEGRACJA UMIEJĘTNOŚCI JĘZYKOWYCH W JĘZYKU OBCYM:
POMIĘDZY NAUCZANIEM TRADYCYJNYM A ZDALNYM**

Since the wide acceptance of the traditional conceptualization of the four skills in EFL methodology – that is listening, reading, speaking and writing – in the 1960s and 1970s, it has become clear that the framework for foreign language skill instruction requires further professional modification. In fact, over the years a range of questions have been put forward in order to explain potential relationships between them and suggest their ordering, coordination, integration or interdependence in working out practical solutions. The undertaken debates have contributed to launching the use of the terms of ‘integrating language skills’ or ‘integrated skills’. The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of evolving standpoints taken by ELT specialists on the issue of integrating language skills, primarily referred to the four language skills. However, since the audiolinguists’ support given to the traditional model of the four skills, both theoreticians and practitioners have brought about into the forefront a range of new ideas, many of them connected with the growing significance of ICT and online activities implemented in L2/FL teaching and learning. The considerations of language skills integration have proved crucial for materials and course designers as well as practicing teachers responsible for lesson planning and task construction. A recently proposed division of language skills into reception, production, interaction and mediation (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018) has reduced the status of the traditional conceptualization of the four language skills and offered a broader, more comprehensive view of language skills and the links holding between them.

Keywords: teaching English as a foreign language, the four language skills, the discrete skills approach, skills integration, online language teaching, reconceptualization of language skills

1. Introduction

A constant adherence to the tradition of organizing L2/FL materials and practice in terms of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, advocated ardently by audiolingualists in the 1960s, has encouraged numerous EFL specialists to ask questions about the potential links and relationships among them. The terms commonly used in the discussion have proved to be those of correlation, combination, interdependence and integration, just to mention a few. Additional support for the importance of the issue came from a simple observation that language skills do not typically function in isolation in natural environments (Burns and Siegel, 2018: 2). Even if they are analysed and explained separately in theory, a natural overlap between them in real-life verbal communication is an undeniable fact. McDonough and Shaw (2003: 173-175) point out that the overlap of language skills is also a characteristic feature of communicatively-oriented classrooms, which are typically based on large amounts of interaction among learners, and, in consequence, require that pair and group work becomes a required form of classroom activities, which ultimately involves multiple language skills. Another powerful argument for skills integration is that language practice transferred from one skill to another constitutes an efficient reinforcement of language samples in the language acquisition process (Field, 2008: 73).

Yet, it is not only the impact of CLT methodology but also the development of task-based learning and teaching, Content and Language Integrated Learning as well as progress in the understanding of second language acquisition processes that have shed more light on the issue of skills integration. Whatever the path followed, many EFL teachers began considering the importance of creating proper conditions for acquiring language skills in formal school environments, similar to those in real life language communication. In defining conducive language acquisition conditions, Egbert, Chao and Hanson-Smith (1999), for instance, claimed that for optimal input processing and learning to take place, FL learners should be provided with numerous opportunities to interact and negotiate meanings while receiving individualised feedback. They should also be engaged in using language creatively and perform tasks that would ensure their cognitive engagement in the learning process as well as responsibility for the learning outcomes. Clearly, interaction among learners themselves and learners and the teacher through the use of various combinations of language skills and tasks is a major factor in instructed language acquisition processes.

Even though in instructional materials design, the majority of ELT mainstream methodologists have, explicitly or implicitly, followed the division of language skills

into listening, reading, speaking and writing, the important role played by language skills interdependencies has not remained unnoticed. The acknowledgement of the potential strength of integration has resulted in distinguishing two main approaches, a segregated (discrete) vs. an integrated skill ones. Their definitions offered by Oxford (2011) maintain that:

- **a segregated skill instruction** underlines the specificity of each skill and subskills involved in it as well as strategies implemented;
- **an integrated skill instruction** reveals relationships between skills based on their psycholinguistic features and their use in a variety of pragmatic contexts, especially when implemented in conjunction (p. 2).

Interestingly, as indicated by Oxford (2011: 3-5), a segregated skill instruction conceptualizes the four skills in terms of their development by individual learners. On the other hand, an integrated skill instruction, which benefits from the use of skills in conjunction, involves pairs or groups of interlocutors sharing language skills. Accepting this dichotomy, however enlightening it may be, gives a too simplified picture of how language skills are to be approached. The sheer path of the search for different aspects of skills interrelation carried out so far shows the complex nature of the phenomena under discussion, not to mention the problem with the interpretation of language as a skill and the process of language skills acquisition in second/foreign language environments (see Dakowska, 2014).

Despite the fact that numerous recently published ELT books still lead their learners through the practice of the four language skills, more comprehensive views on the issue have also been added as language teaching and learning specialists aspire to clarify processes and activities involved in language skills integration. This is not to undermine the fact that the heightened awareness of the need for a better interpretation of the interrelationships between language skills was already perceived to be a vital issue more than half a century ago (Chodkiewicz, 1982: 234).

2. Explaining skills integration – different aspects of the phenomenon

Skills integration in foreign language instruction is unquestionably a multiaspectual phenomenon which requires further reconsideration in the light of new research findings in the field. It is worth noting that much of the debate among ESL/EFL methodologists has maintained a focus on two dichotomies, namely reception vs. production and oral vs. written modalities and their role in the language teaching and learning processes.

A rethinking the relationship between speech and writing by the proponents of communicative methodology has helped reject audiolinguists' assumption that

writing is of a secondary nature and expound the view that the choice of mode is primarily dependent on learners' communicative goals and situational context. What is more, due to the development of language corpora studies differences between written language and speech could be clarified, including grammar rules applied in speech and writing (Harmer, 2001: 14-15). Dakowska (2005: 180-181) provides an essential list of differences between what she calls the phonemic (auditory) and graphic (written) codes. Hedge (2008), on the other hand, believes that attempts at identifying specific features carried by the two modes have offered a deeper insight into the role of oracy in a foreign language conceptualized as "the ability to understand and participate in spoken communication" (p. 229).

Some ESL/EFL specialists have considered it pertinent to employ the term "reciprocity", in other words, to refer to reciprocal skills, in order to further specify the interconnection between skills in their natural use and to deal more effectively with the issue in pedagogic contexts. Also, the complementariness of listening and speaking as well as reading and writing was analysed in detail so as to work out more effective teaching procedures (e.g. Nation and Newton, 2009; Hirvela, 2013; Burns and Siegel, 2018). Hirvela (2013: 2) argues that writing helps learners become better readers since they develop knowledge about texts, writers and the writing process and become better informed as to where the information relevant for the comprehension process can be found in the text. What is more, L2/FL learners as readers detect and acquire knowledge concerning the structure of the written text, as well as the rhetorical strategies and cohesive devices used, which results in raising their awareness of the text composing process.

In a similar vein, in-depth debates on the importance of spoken communication in foreign language skills development have generated interest in the reciprocity of listening and speaking. A crucial contribution to recognizing the issue clearly comes from drawing a distinction between speaking production and interaction (Council of Europe, 2001: 57), or, in other words, between listening activities labeled as one-way (non-participatory) vs. two-way (interactive/ participatory) (Hedge, 2000: 229; Vandergrift and Goh, 2012: 168; Richards 2015: 371-2). As a consequence, a high status of the interactive nature of verbal communication has been confirmed. Nation and Newton (2009: 40) point out that whereas the traditional approach in EFL methodology focuses on one-way listening, that is the simple transmission of information in the form of monologues, the contemporary approach treats listening as a component of interlocutors' dialogic performance. This means that pair and group work have to constitute a vital component in teaching spoken language in a second/foreign language classroom. Interestingly, a significant remark is made by Goh (2014: 1) who notes that the development of oracy in L2/FL instruction cannot be limited to day-to-day communication because spoken language is also

an indispensable tool for academic work. It fosters learners' critical thinking as well as their collaboration and innovation skills which are essential at the time of increasing globalization in contemporary societies.

The dichotomy between receptive and productive skills has also generated a large amount of discussion in mainstream ELT literature (e.g. Dakowska, 2005; Harmer, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Komorowska, 2001). This was due to the impact of advances in psycholinguistics, SLA studies and applied linguistics, with a key interest in the properties and place of comprehension and production in language use and learning. While Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis underscored the role of comprehensible input with the exclusion of output, Swain (1985) identified some ways in which comprehensible output can contribute to language learning (Ellis and Shinanti, 2014: 9-10). Izumi (2003) gives a comprehensive theoretical explanation of the path an L2 learner follows in the language acquisition process from the comprehension of language input, through intake and integration to language output, with situation-, task- and learner-related variables influencing it.

In order to better understand the change in conceptualizing foreign language skills, it is worth considering Dakowska's (2014: 3-4) stance. In describing three stages in the understanding of foreign language skills, she assigns special importance to the advances that took place between the linguistic stage mid 20th century and the psycholinguistic stage turn of the 21st century. Whereas the former period emphasised the aspects of constructing and organizing activities aimed at teaching the four basic language skills with theoretical assumptions based on linguistics and psychology, the recent two decades have advocated a psycholinguistic stand. As a consequence, verbal communication is now given a broad view as a psychological and sociological phenomenon, while the four language skills are interpreted in terms of comprehension and production processes, with metamodal representations underlying each of them.

3. The four strands in language skills development

An innovative approach to foreign language teaching and learning which involves, yet does not directly refer to the traditionally acknowledged four language skills, has been suggested by Nation (2007: 2). The researcher proposes distinguishing the so-called four strands in foreign language development, which are labeled **meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning** and **fluency development**. The idea behind this frequently quoted approach is to bring to attention vital issues connected with language acquisition processes,

in particular to input and output hypotheses, form-focused instruction and speaking and reading fluency.

The four strands are defined by Nation (2007) in the following way:

- meaning-focused input – receptive language use of large quantities of input provided by extensive reading, listening or watching TV/films which makes it possible for FL learners to acquire new lexis when they understand the input and know 95-98% of words in it;
- meaning-focused output – productive use of language in speaking and writing that requires the use of communicative strategies in order to convey information which helps learners notice gaps in their output, test hypotheses and reflect on their language problems;
- language focused learning (focus on form) – deliberate learning of language elements which requires “opportunities to give spaced, repeated attention to the same features” (p. 6) and raises learners’ consciousness;
- fluency development – increasing the speed of learners’ performance when they both receive and produce large amounts of input and output focusing on meaning (Nation, 2007: 7-8).

Nation (2007) finds it imperative that the four strands be implemented throughout the language course in a balanced way. It is worth noting, however, that while meaning-focused input and output are assumed to activate the well-known receptive and productive dimensions attributed to skills integration, focus on form and fluency are new categories attached to the concept of integrated skills. As a result, a standpoint is made that some language instruction is to be directed at the knowledge and practice of the subsystems of a target language as well as at the need of automatizing learners’ performance so that a natural real life pace of language communication can be achieved.

4. Integrated skills instruction as a basis for a pedagogical framework

Some EFL specialists have looked at integrating language skills in terms of adopting a broader approach to foreign language teaching and learning. Oxford (2011: 3-4) mentions two main pedagogical frameworks which comply with the assumptions of language skills integration. The first one is a fairly extensive area in education nowadays, that is **content-based language instruction**. It aims to create conditions for learners to acquire selected content through language, with language being also a goal of instruction. The other approach is **task-based instruction**, which maintains that learners should be required to comprehend, manipulate and interact in language as well as achieve non-linguistic goals by expressing and negotiating meanings.

Such an approach is dependent on providing learners with ample opportunities for pair and group work with collaboration becoming the key feature of classroom activities. Both approaches are sufficiently broad to be applied in order to implement and combine a variety of materials, textbooks and technologies which can ensure different ways of skills integration.

Hinkel (2006: 115), on the other hand, shows preference for using the term **multiskill instruction** with reference to integrating multiple skills to be taught in educational contexts. She reminds that realistic communication requires the use of “incremental language skills not in isolation but in tandem”, and hence only the simultaneous use of a range of skills can facilitate language learning. This type of skills integration is accepted by a range of instructional models given such labels as “content-based, task-based, text-based (also called genre-based), problem-based, literature-based, literacy-based, community-based, competency-based, or standard-based”, just to mention a few.

Furthermore, Hinkel (2006: 113-114) notes that despite the emergence of new approaches recommending skills integration, the superiority of these models over traditional ones has not been proved. This is mainly so because the effectiveness of the implementation of content-based or task-based models is not possible to evaluate as they are not suitable for use in all L2/FL contexts. Substantial factors that impact the ultimate learning outcomes are the low proficiency of learners, the lack of teacher expertise, or focus on accuracy. The researcher, however, sees the need for integrating the four language skills with other language skills, for example, teaching speaking in conjunction with pronunciation and intonation as well as pragmalinguistic skills, that is sociopragmatic norms (communication strategies, conversational routines/formulae, speech acts) and features of spoken register (Hinkel, 2006: 115-17). At least some of the issues mentioned by Hinkel (2006) are given due notice by the authors of the Common European framework for languages: learning, teaching and assessment (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018).

5. Towards a reconceptualisation of language skills – the impact of “The Common European framework for languages: learning, teaching and assessment” (Council of Europe, 2001)

“The Common European framework for languages: learning, teaching and assessment” (the CEFR) is a significant document published by the Council of Europe in 2001, which has considerably contributed to shaping language teaching and assessment policy not just in the countries of the European Union but all over the world (Komorowska, 2017: 166).

The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) discusses a range of different language-related skills, apart from those called language/communicative skills, which are indispensable in using and learning the target language. In order to render traditionally recognized language skills, the authors of the CEFR refer to the abilities of language users who aim to develop skillful language use. Hence the following statement : “To act as a speaker, writer, listener or reader, the learner must be able to carry out a sequence of skilled actions” (p. 90). As a consequence, the language speaker is described as the one who activates cognitive skills (planning and organizing a message), linguistic skills (formulating an utterance message) and phonetic skills (articulating an utterance) (Council of Europe, 2001: 90). A general description of all the types of language performance is based on the classification of communicative language activities (situations/genres). They are represented by **receptive, productive, interactive and mediation activities and strategies** with accompanying scales attached to them. In this way the adoption of the traditionally used term of ‘the four language skills’ has been avoided, whereas the general concept of skills as well as the names of the widely accepted four language skills, that is listening, reading, speaking and writing, remain in use. The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) refers to a range of different skills (apart from language/communicative skills) underlying the use of language as well as those requisite for learning a language. The authors state that their goal is “to specify as full a range of language knowledge, skills and use as possible” (p.7).

Whereas the traditionally addressed four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) have been replaced in the CEFR (Council of Europe , 2001) with a higher-order dichotomy between receptive and productive activities and strategies, the term ‘interaction’ appears as a new category of verbal communication which involves both reception and production, and the term ‘mediation’ comprises all the three activity types. What is interesting to look briefly at are the kinds of activities listed as representing production and reception, but also interaction and mediation. They are shown in the section below. It is worth noting that reception has been enriched with audiovisual activities and that all the categories include a range of well-known real-life language-oriented activities.

Productive activities:

- oral production (speaking) – overall oral production, sustained monologue, addressing audiences;
- written production (writing) – overall written production, creative writing, reports and essays (Council of Europe, 2001: 58-63).

Receptive activities:

- aural reception (listening) – overall listening comprehension, understanding interaction between native speakers, listening as a member of a live audience, listening to announcements and instructions, listening to audio media and recordings;
- visual reception (reading) – overall reading comprehension, reading correspondence, reading for orientation, reading for information and argument, reading instructions;
- audiovisual reception – watching TV and film (Council of Europe, 2001: 65-72).

Interactive activities:

- spoken interaction – overall spoken interaction, understanding a native speaker interlocutor, conversation, informal/formal discussions, meetings, goal-oriented co-operation, transactions to obtain goods and services, information exchange, interviewing and being interviewed;
- written interaction – overall written interaction, correspondence, notes, messages and forms (Council of Europe, 2001: 73-86).

Mediating activities:

- oral mediation – simultaneous/consecutive/informal interpretation; exact/literary translation, summarising gist, paraphrasing (Council of Europe, 2001: 87-88).

It is unquestionable that the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) has had a profound impact on EFL specialists' and practicing teachers' views concerning many valid language teaching and learning issues. As highlighted by Komorowska (2017: 170), it has not only raised FL teachers' awareness of the concepts of interaction and mediation, but also offered the ways of describing language use in terms of specific domains, themes, communicative functions and situations, as well as a wide array of text types.

6. The revised version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018) – the four modes of communication

The revised version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), entitled the CEFR Companion Volume published by the Council of Europe in 2018 has extended and updated the already highly appreciated document among FL teachers in European countries. It is important to note that *the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018)* presents an openly critical view of the traditionally recognized

four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) which are found to be “inadequate to capture the complex reality of communication”. Instead a description of real-life language use is proposed, which underscores its interactive nature and the importance of the co-construction of meanings expressed by interlocutors. Thus language activities are organized into the overarching taxonomy of the **four modes of communication**: reception, production, interaction and mediation. Such a development of the view launched in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) clearly goes beyond the traditional model of the four language skills.

Although the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018) follows the distinction between reception, production, interaction and mediation already advocated in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), a further change into the handling of particular types of communicative activities is introduced, new scales and descriptors are provided, and the concepts of interaction and mediation are redefined. The potential of multimodal activities, the role played by internet resources, as well as the application of multimedia are brought into the forefront. A new category of **online interaction** is added.

Online interaction is represented by online conversation and discussion and goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration. As the authors explain, “Both these scales concern the multimodal activity typical of web use, including just checking or exchanging responses, spoken interaction and longer production in live link-ups, using chat (written spoken language), longer blogging or written contributions to discussion, and embedding other media” (Council of Europe, 2018: 51). It is underlined that online interaction is not like face-to-face interaction. Online group interaction is characterized by features absent in an individual’s performance in speech or writing. Although the resources used are available in real time, effective communication requires some help in comprehending information or reformulating it when needed (Council of Europe, 2018: 96).

Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration are typical of numerous situations in real life. The use of multimodality does not offer a definite separation between oral and written performance as different media and tools can be used. Online transactions and collaboration cover purchasing goods and services online, negotiations between a service and a client, doing collaborative project work or solving communication problems. Learners perform shared tasks, coordinate group work, revise instructions and evaluate proposals (Council of Europe, 2018: 98).

7. Conclusions

The understanding of the four language skills to be developed in teaching and learning foreign languages and a more general term of language competences have been evolving over the years. Although handled with different degrees of explicitness, the relevant discussion has had important implications for materials writers and L2/FL teachers and learners responsible for organizing effective classroom practice. A general trend has certainly been to look for a better description and interpretation of categories adopted in explaining the process of language use and learning. This, in turn, required clarifying links between language knowledge, skills, competences and strategies employed in different kinds of L2/FL verbal communication typical of contemporary contexts, including a variety of online tasks performed by language learners and users nowadays.

The argumentation presented in the current chapter can be summed up by emphasizing some key points. First of all, it has to be concluded that modeling language competence in terms of the four skills, especially discrete ones, gives a simplistic and incomplete view of L2/FL language competences, though, on the other hand, it creates satisfactory grounds to account for each of the skills in an in-depth manner with the consideration of their psycholinguistic characteristics. What is more, working out a comprehensive view and description of language competences and their development in L2/FL environments requires that language specialists scrupulously identify the dimensions of integration and interplay among skills, strategies and communicative modes. The problem of the use of language skills and their integration is not to be limited to communication problems; second language acquisition theories, in particular, imply that the role of input and output in the process of language learning needs a proper consideration.

It is also worth noting that the issue of skills, strategies and modalities integration in foreign language instruction requires different levels of concern, including course design, lesson planning, task construction as well as technology use. A typical classroom environment shows that overlap and integration of different language skills is unavoidable since they are not used in isolation but are naturally practiced simultaneously. In contrast to the stress put on the individual's behaviour while using a particular language skill in the past, currently, more classroom space is devoted to pair and group work, project work and collaboration, with numerous tasks performed online. The integration of language skills is also supported with real-world focus of classroom work, the authenticity of materials and tasks used as well as the organization of the content to teach in terms of topics and themes

(with established ranges of vocabulary). All this helps create appropriate language input to be implemented in different foreign language teaching contexts.

On balance, due to the advances in exploring the traditionally distinguished four language skills by language specialists, a new way of approaching foreign language teaching and learning goals in terms of reception, production, interaction and mediation has been proposed (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018). This broader and more comprehensive organization of language competences not only manifests the significance of new concepts and the links between them but also assigns a more adequate place to the role of the media and online communication in the modern multilingual world.

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