TEACHING READING WITHIN A SKILL – INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT: The current article, entitled "Teaching reading within a skill – integrated framework" has as main focus an analysis of the relation and interdetermination between the four skills involved in the process of teaching-learning ELT. There is, without any doubt, a close connection and interaction between the receptive and productive skills which a student is expected to develop along the process, and reading can function as a "trigger" to many activities and learning strategies meant to improve one's knowledge and use of the English language. The article is the result of the personal scientific research carried out by the author, as well as the observations made throughout the teaching experience of the last 15 years as a teacher of English to young learners and also pre-intermediate and intermediate students.

KEYWORDS: reading, listening, speaking, writing, teacing, methods, strategies, activities, learning, students, texts, assessment, evaluation.

The main goal of the current article is to carry out an analysis of the inter-determinant relation between the four skills of the English language, stating that none of them actually develops as isolated from the others; they are in close relation, even when one skill is reinforced more than the others, as for example is the case with listening vs. writing at elementary level. This inter-related development of reading together with the other skills of listening, speaking and writing becomes gradually more evident as students pass from one acquisition level to the others. So we are more likely to apply an integrating-skills lesson at intermediate level.

It is also worth mentioning that most current coursebooks favour and implement this type of teaching all four skills within an integrated framework. While perusing the existing literature on the topic we came across a beautiful metaphor of the English language seen as a perfect tapestry

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where all the strands – vocabulary, grammar, spelling, language skills- are interwoven to form English language proficiency.

The above mentioned teaching approaches of TBL and CBL are probably the most suitable to achieve this goal of integrative teaching / learning of the language.

The receptive skill of reading can easily become the engine enhancing and activating all the other skills through a wide range of activities.

1. Teaching listening through reading

Though we have intentionally put the terms of the relation in this order it is obvious that we are in front of a reciprocal learning situation, as these two particular skills are so much inter-connected and they serve each others' interest in the most perfect way. It is advisable that at any grade/ level the reading-listening activities be accompanied by visual aids of any type, as they facilitate the strong relation between two human perceptive senses: sight and hearing. It was scientifically proved that a better comprehension of what we read/learn through reading is enhanced by audio supplementary input.

Some classroom activities by means of which we can reinforce listening through reading are listed below:

– *Reading aloud* in the classroom is an activity which can demonstrate its benefits at every grade level, being an efficient tool for vocabulary expansion, improvement of reading comprehension, as well as self- confidence. The activities can undertake different forms from:

– the model reading done by the teacher with the students following in their books;

– students taking turns in reading aloud parts of a text or passages of a book;

– students reading aloud a written assignment.

– *Listening to recorded texts* while reading the script, which is a slightly more solicitating task as the speech rhythm is more alert; aspects such as intonation, dialect or accent of the speaker on the recorded material can influence understanding. Nevertheless it has been noted that students are more likely to comprehend a text if this one is accompanied by a listening material. Handouts to check comprehension through both skills can be included.

– *Storytelling/reading* in the classroom which is in fact a lengthier, more complex variant of the teacher-modelled reading, but which also brings the benefits of introducing the students to cultural or affective issues.

– *Shared reading* is an enjoyable, interactive activity stemming from the model of the bedtime reading. Teachers usually use the so-called "big books", with vivid, clear illustration which enable asking and answering questions, making prediction on what is going to happen and checking predictions through listening.

– *Watching movies with English subtitles*- facilitates learning the spelling and pronunciation at the same time, enhances a better comprehension of bothe the movie and the text/script. A suggested variant could be to watch the movie for two time, first with the subtitles and second without them to enable students to become more independent in listening comprehension.

– *Associating graded readers with audio aids (CDs or cassettes)* which can be very useful if reading/ listening activites are done either simultaneously or alternatively.

– *Listening to a specific recorded text and then read to check* –an activity that can be adapted to most of the lessons in the students' textbooks; the reading comprehension of the tapescript is reinforced by the prior listening activity.

– *Listening to songs* accompanied by different possible tasks: – completing the lyrics, matching htem with images, rearranging the lines etc.

2. Teaching speaking through reading

Reading is a remarkably useful resource for speaking activities which accompany the reading itself. The aim of integrating the two skills is that of creating on a long term basis the students' ability for spontaneous speech, which is characteristic of everyday life. Over the years there has been a lot of complaint regarding the low level of oral communicative competence of secondary level graduates, i.e. the so often used excuse"I understand a lot of what I hear, but I cannot express myself". One explanation could be that all too often in the classroom practice we stress upon the language input rather than on the output. This is why reading – speaking activities should gain a larger focus within an integrating class. Special attention should be paid to the type of speaking tasks tha we design to back-up reading. They must parallel the students' proficiency level, also trying to keep a balance between tasks that are too demanding on the learners and thus inhibitant and much too easy tasks that could cast away their interest and initiative. When regarded in connection with reading tasks, speaking activities can be included at any stage of the lesson- pre/while/post

reading and they can also be carried out either as a whole class approach or in groups/pairs. The teacher should always provide equal chances to participating in the speaking tasks to all students. It is particularly important that we do not fall in the trap of focusing on a limited number of students who might already be quite competent in oral expression to the disadvantage of the others who can become frustrated and non-willing to activate their speech anymore. Another aspect that most times prevents effective speaking of our students is the teacher's interference with their speech; all too often we try to fill the void ourselves. Instead we should encourage and motivate students to express themselves as often as possible, with reduced and discreet correction from the teacher during the speech flow.

From this point of view reading can definitely provide an engaging start point towards a variety of reading – speaking tasks.

– Role-play is an appealing, motivational activity for both young and intermediate students where they can act-out, which is so characteristic of their age, specific roles- like the princess with little ones or the manager in a job-interview situation with older ones. In both cases role-play follows a first reading of a model text. Role-play activities can be applied to short dialogues and also to longer texts fromthe coursebooks or authentic materials.Such acting- out tasks can be developed later on into more complex dramatizing activities that include memorization of certain replies, use of specific intonation, creativity and self- confidence in using the language on their own.

– Memorizing and reciting chants / rhymes or longer poems can improve the students' awareness of such issues as intonation, tone, voice pitch.

– Interpreting song lyrics enables the use of language in a specific rhythmic pattern.

– Dramatizing longer, more complex texts like stories, plays or parts of them. It can sometimes take the form of guided, trained children's theatre. This type of reading – speaking activities is valuable to EFL learners in both language acquisition as well as developing their public speaking abilities, enriching their imagination, eliciting hteir spontaneity and initiative.

– Discussions or debates elicited by the reading of a text which also promote the development of critical thinking skills and the ability od problem posing and problem solving.

– Presentation of projects following a reading activity in front of the classroom reinforces the students' communicative and persuasive competences and functions as a factor of high motivation for further individual or team work.

3. Teaching writing through listening

Although we have stressed upon the necessity of integrating all four language skills within the English classroom practice, there are instances where curricula designers and also teachers tend to separate reading and writing. It is therefore important to restablish the fruitful connection that exists between reading and writing in the EFL learning/teaching. The arguments to support this idea are numerous and powerful. Let us first go back to S. Krashen's[2] stance that "it is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture". He underlines the idea that any accurate successful writing should start and build on the foundation of solid sustained reading. Written texts can be influential on the learner both in what regards language input as well as the refinement of the reader/writer – text relationship. On the one hand the reading of texts belonging to different genres introduces the reader to a vast range of grammatical structures, lexical patterns or discourse constructs which have the advantage of validated accuracy, thus leading the way for the development of the future writer, in terms of correct language use or composition rules. On the other hand, once the reader already has a rich, strong background of knowledge acquired from the texts he/she has read he can start and reverse the receptive process of reading towards the productive writing one.

The skill of writing may be regarded from two perspectives: – as means for other types of classroom activities; – as an end in itself; – or sometimes a mixt approach is possible.

In the former situation students may have to write answers to questions, to complete information gaps, to rewrite a text with specific requirements, etc.

In the latter situation we are in fact referring to writing tasks of a higher complexity / difficulty level such as: reports/reviews of books; narratives, descriptions, formal / informal letters, etc., all following the pre-set model of the reading text.

[2]   Krashen, Stephen. D. (1982): *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition,* South Carolina, Pergamon Press Inc.

If we attempt to look at the writing tasks strictly from the point of view of their relation to reading we may design a wide array of writing activities adapted to follow the stages in a typical reading lesson, i.e. pre/while/after reading.

– Writing- before- reading activities aimed to activate the reader's previous information about what he is going to read or his impressions and opinions about a certain topic that we want to introduce through the text.

– Summarizing in their own words what they have comprehended from the text; this will enable them to activate some strategies for selecting important information from the text.

– Keeping a reading journal which can contain from new words or expressions to passages they find impressive or comments they have on the text.

4. Teaching vocabulary through reading

"Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge of the language; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition but also implies how that word fits into the world."[3]

The close relation between reading and vocabulary has always been stressed upon in the methodology courses and is also obvious for every teacher who works with all the systems of the language within an integrated framework. Achieving reading proficiency depends considerably on the consistency of the students' vocabulary, just as vocabulary enrichment depends on intensive/extensive reading activities. Everything then results in the students' fluency and accuracy.

Teaching vocabulary to EFL learners is of paramount importance for the later success of any foreign language related activity. A limited vocabulary implicitly leads to limitations in communication abilities, in reading or listening comprehension. There are obviously numerous ways to teach vocabulary, but exposing the students to learning new words and expressions in the context of a reading task is probably the most effective and the results also prevail on a long term basis. Students should be trained to acquire and develop independent word-learning strategies, while they actively involve in intensive/ extensive reading activities. They will thus

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[3] Stahl, Steven (1999): *Vocabulary Development*, University of Georgia, Brookline Books, p. 11.

become more word- conscious and will expand their vocabulary more easily and naturally.

A large range of activities is at the teacher's disposal to ensure efficient vocabulary acquisition:

– Introducing vocabulary during the pre-reading stage of the lesson (pre-teaching new words or key words, giving explanations, using/asking the students to use the words in other examples, eliciting synonyms, antonyms, related words);

– Using authentic, life-like texts;

– Designing read-aloud classes focused on vocabulary;

– Reading activities followed by dictations to check vocabulary;

– Working with the dictionary;

– Keeping word/ phrases records;

– Guessing the meaning of words in context; finding other meanings of those words;

– Focus on the use of prefixes, suffixes, compound words, word families;

– Explaining and working with collocations;

– Working in pairs or groups on a variety of exercises: multiple choice, crosswords, word snakes, word webs, lists of words, gap-fill exercises;

– Using realia, pictures, miming, action;

– Expanding or shortening sentences and texts;

– Matching words with pictures/definitions;

– Brainstorming words/ expressions related to a certain topic;

– Completing gap sentences with words from the text;

5. Teaching grammar through reading

Grammar and particularly grammar rules are the most frightening side of the English language learning for our students and we all know that very well. They dislike and reject it just as much as we like teaching it. Grammar knowledge promotes a thourough understanding of the texts, noticing new ideas, making connections, in one word exploring texts more in detail. When choosing our way of introducing grammar we need to take into account some guiding characteristics to make our presentation effective. It skould be easy to memorize, clear and accessible in terms of understanding and also appropriate for our students. Our choices should find a balance between the teacher- centred, deductive learning and the student- centred,

inductive learning of grammar. Regardless of how we choose to introduce grammar issues to our students, we must always try to:

– anticipate the students'needs or difficulties;

– break the whole corpus of information into small, alternative number of stages;

– support oral explanations by visual aids, such as diagrams, clines, arrows, charts, grammar boxes, timelines, flashcards etc.;

– introduce the new patterns within an adequate context provided by an authentic written text, a teacher- made story or some other generative situations which are meant to encourage the students' guided discovery.

Among all these opportunities to approach grammar teaching, reading contexts can render the ordeal slightly easier for the students. All this because within the reading context, grammar seems more natural and easier to internalize. New language structures prevail more easily in the learners' memory if they are introduced within the context of a reading text because students become familiar to the way in which those structures are used differently in specific contexts, such as short dialogues vs. longer conversations or stories. Guided discovery of the new grammatical structures and implicitly deducing the rules by themselves may enable students to learn all these more rapidly and more naturally.

So the teacher has to exploit his reading classroom at the maximum, include a lot of reading activities in his/ her teaching practice, choose and provide various texts and tasks to help the learners become more independent in acquiring the English grammar patterns.

Within the framework of a reading lesson the teacher can apply such activities as the ones below to promote the introduction and practice of new grammar items:

– Reversing the traditional "present- practice- production" way of teaching grammar and placing the texts in the role of the teacher. This way the students start their own discovery of the grammar issues;

– Using stories because they provide the background for consistent language practice;

– Using shorter texts where specific grammar structures are in focus and easy to spot;

– Role-play and expand dialogues to reinforce the use of certain structures;

– Story-building (story-chain) to produce numerous examples in context;

– Encourage exposure to a variety of reading materials;

– Using content- based language practice resources.[4]

Some typical tasks for the students when working with texts to learn grammar can include:

– find examples of the grammar issue in the text and underline them;

– find examples and change them with your own;

– find examples and analyse them to elicit the grammar rule etc.

As it can be easily observed reading can be the specific strand in the language tapestry which can bring the others together, thus facilitating active learning and communication.

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[4]   One very useful book that I recommend is *MacMillan English in Context (2008)*