
Reading-Based Integrated-Skills Instruction: A Bridge to Success When Teaching ESP in Limited Class-Time Conditions

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English is a compulsory educational subject for the majority of students in tertiary schools of the former Soviet Union. It is taught for at least two academic years (first and second years of study), and teaching is professionally-oriented, (e.g., teaching English for Science and Technology, English for Medical Students, or Business English), as opposed to the classic dichotomy of General English or EAP. But during these two years of compulsory classes in English, the number of such classes per week is almost always very small. For instance, in Ukraine, it usually varies from one to two classes per week, with 90 minutes for each class. Taking into account the fact that the outcomes of teaching and learning English in secondary schools of the former USSR countries are seldom high, it is hardly surprising that college-level EFL teachers do not often achieve very tangible results in developing the communicative competence of their students. They simply have too little time for it (for more detailed analysis of the EFL teaching situation in Ukraine, see Tarnopolsky, 1996). Therefore, it may be said that in the Ukraine and in many other former USSR countries, tertiary school ESP teachers have to work in limited class-time conditions which creates one of the major obstacles to success in their efforts.

The solution to the problem (due to small chances of increasing allocated class-time for teaching/learning English) was ordinarily sought in limiting teaching/learning objectives in ESP—usually reading professional literature in English, since reading skills were considered to be the most important ones for professional advancement in professional activities outside an English-speaking country. Besides, reading seems to be the skill easiest taught in limited class-time conditions as a lot of work can be done by students themselves in the absence of their teacher (home assignments). In this way, teaching oral communication was limited to the simplest discussions (question-answer work) of assigned texts, and communicative exchanges having no relation to ESP (introducing oneself and making acquaintances, speaking out about towns and countries where people live, universities where they study, etc.). So, if teaching in English was

really content-based (in the sense content-based instruction is understood by Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989), focusing on authentic professional texts, listening and speaking were left in the domain of General English, despite explicitly stated course objectives. Likewise, writing was almost totally excluded from the curricula.

Leaving aside the question whether this scheme, principally designed for developing reading skills, worked well in the past (far from always so, first of all because of the numerous vestiges of the grammar-translation method in teaching reading), it is clearly inadequate at present when the fall of the iron curtain has made possible, highly desirable, and quite frequent, direct contacts between Ukrainian, Russian, Byelorussian and other former USSR specialists in science, technology, economics, etc., and their Western colleagues. The situation requires not only reading, but speaking, listening, and writing as well. These last three skills must be developed in a process that is content-based (ESP) in just the same way as reading skills are developed—otherwise, professionals cannot meet their special needs.

Certainly, reading still remains the focal point as the skill that can most often be used in day-to-day professional activities outside an English-speaking country and as the most probable one in which students can attain reasonably high proficiency in limited class-time conditions (that have not changed). But focusing on reading must be combined with teaching procedures that effectively develop speaking, listening, and writing. If reading is to remain a focal skill and a focal point in teaching, speaking, listening, and writing skills may be and should be developed on the basis of and in inextricable connection with it, i.e., in the process of reading-based integrated-skills instruction. In the context of limited instructional time, it is hardly possible to count on students' attaining as high a level of speaking, listening, and writing proficiency as is possible for reading. But, at least minimum proficiency for professional communication in oral or written form needs to be achieved. It requires a specific teaching program and what follows is the description of an attempt to develop such a program for one of the leading Ukrainian technical universities—Dniepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport.

Reading-based Integrated-skills Instruction

A program of reading-based integrated-skills instruction in ESP was developed for second-year students of the above-mentioned University majoring in Transport Economy and Management. In view of these particular students' future professional activities, the specific kind of ESP for them is Business English. But the syllabus specifies that business texts themselves (such as texts of business contracts and agreements, corporate annual reports etc.,) are to be read beginning only from the second

year of study while reading in the first year is concentrated around the general issues of economy, basic notions of management etc. The reasons for this division are as follows: (1) It is only from their second year of study that students fully start their major program, while in the first year they study economy and management in general and (2) developing skills of reading authentic business texts (not texts on general issues of economy and management) is the most important task and, therefore, should be done in the most favorable conditions—in particular, allowing for contribution of L1 reading ability to L2 reading performance. According to the threshold hypothesis (Carrell, 1988; Clarke, 1980; Cummins, 1979), supported in an EFL context by the experimental results of Lee and Schallert's (1997) research, students need to reach some minimum level of proficiency in L2 before their L1 reading ability can help them in improving their skills in L2 reading. The first year of English at Dniepropetrovsk Technical University is designed to attain that level.

Therefore, the genuine course of ESP begins in the second-year, and it was for this year that we developed a specific ESP reading-based integrated-skills instruction program. Though this program like most, was concentrated on reading as the focal point, reading did not take the greatest part of class time (reading occupied only about one fifth or less of it). In fact, speaking, listening, and writing were given the greatest amount of time (especially the first two) with topics, content of communication, and language material coming from assigned reading. In the program, all the classes in a semester were divided into units (three 90-minute classes in one unit), each unit having a unifying theme (e.g. business contracts and agreements, standard structure and hierarchy of a firm or company, etc.). Classes in a unit were divided into the pre-reading stage, reading stage, and post-reading stage with specific learning activities for each.

The Pre-Reading Stage

This stage (the first 90-minutes in a unit) includes:

1. *Introducing learners to the topic* (theme) of one or several texts to be read, i.e., introducing them to the subject-matter to make it easier for comprehension, as recommended in a sheltered English approach (Freeman & Freeman, 1991). Such a preview is done in an oral presentation by the teacher, followed by students listening either to a tape-recorded business lecture or conversation dealing with the same content or, more often, their watching a short video on the same topic (recordings and videos used are taken from US or British Business English teaching materials). Videos are preferred to tape-recordings and are used whenever possible since they give a unique opportunity of demonstrating complete communicative situations and visualizing them,

as well as the objects of discourse. Thus, this phase of the pre-reading stage is totally devoted to listening (and viewing—with videos).

2. *Discussing what was heard and sharing views.* At first the discussion is teacher-fronted and is used as a comprehension check and as a means of clarifying to some of the students what they have failed to understand when listening (key words and structures from the teacher's oral presentation and the other listening materials are also discussed in this phase). The ordinary continuation is further discussion of the information obtained while listening, in small groups of 3–4 students. Participants are asked to exchange opinions on what they have just heard and share their own background information and knowledge of the subject matter. As a final stage, short presentations are made by representatives of every small group for all the students to hear. Such presentations sum up the results of small group discussions and serve as a basis for a new teacher-fronted discussion. In this way, the second phase of the pre-reading stage is focused on speaking English (and listening too—to what other students have to say). This stage, as a whole, makes it possible for students not only to guess fairly accurately the content of the texts to be read in the next stage and articulate their background knowledge as to this content, but also to make future reading a reasoning task (Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991).

The Reading Stage

The reading stage occupies the second class in a unit and consists of:

1. *Reading by all the students* following the SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, review) procedure. This is done in the classroom during the first 3 or 4 units so the students fully master the SQ3R procedure. (Afterwards, it is transferred to home assignments given at the end of the first class in a unit). Reading is followed by a discussion that is either teacher-fronted or conducted in small groups. The purpose of the discussion is not only to clarify some points in the text, but to also allow the teacher to check comprehension), and elicit students' personal opinions about what was read. The discussion also serves as a means of comparing what was listened to and said on the same subject matter during the preceding stage (class) with what was read in the text. Special attention is given to information that does not coincide or is in conflict with students' opinions and pre-reading guesses, or their background knowledge. Thus, this phase is designed to promote oral communication on the basis of what is read (and heard from other students).

2. *In-class reading of different texts by different students*, i.e., texts different in content but dealing with the same topic (theme) as the first text. It should be noted that

both the individual texts and the preceding text (same for all) are authentic ones taken from original US or British sources (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*). Reading of individual texts is always timed and done in different regimes but with the emphasis on skimming and scanning, since the principle task is to teach reading of extended pieces of texts for general information—using appropriate skills and strategies (Grabe, 1986).

3. *Exchanging information obtained from individual texts just read.* The work is done in small groups of 3–4 students. Every student in such a small group tells his/her partners about the content of his/her text(s), answers their questions about this content, and then information from different individual texts is compared and discussed, taking into account all the preceding information obtained while reading, listening, and speaking. In this way, speaking English and listening to what other people say are the essence of the students' activities in the third phase of the second class in a unit.

Post-Reading Stage Structure

The final class in a unit includes:

1. *Simulation(s) organized and carried out* on the basis of information obtained from the preceding reading, listening, and discussing. For instance, if in the preceding two classes everything read, listened to, or discussed concentrated on financial issues, the executive board meeting of an imaginary firm or company may be simulated—this meeting devoted to the firm's financial situation, budget, profit and losses etc. Different simulations usually take up to one half (45 minutes) of the third class in a unit, and are organized in accordance with recommendations and suggestions made by Jones (1982). So, this is the phase of creative imaginary situation-stimulated speaking and listening to other students.

2. *Writing an essay of about 100–150 words* on the topic of what was read, listened to, and discussed heretofore. For instance, if the subject matter was finances, the topic of an essay may be different ways of maintaining financial stability in a firm or company. The writing itself is done as a home assignment from the second to the third class in a unit. In class, students exchange their essay, and write a short commentary. Then (in the same class) the peer-commented essays are given back to their authors who, after reading the commentary, either correct, or modify their drafts, and rewrite them, or, in the case of disagreement with the peer-commentator, write a short response to her/his comments. The peer-commented essays, after having passed again through the hands of their authors (for correcting or leaving unchanged the first draft), are handed over to the teacher for her/his commentaries. The teacher discusses the results with her/his students at the very beginning of the first class in the following unit, and after this discussion, some or all of

the essays may be rewritten and again teacher-commented. This approach approximates process-oriented writing (Zamel, 1982) and is linked to not only the preceding reading (Zamel, 1992), but with listening and speaking as well, and serves as a kind of summing up end-piece to all the activities in the unit.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above description of the reading-based integrated-skills instruction program, in every unit students proceed, following the path of listening → speaking (with listening) → reading (with speaking and listening) → reading → speaking (with listening) → speaking (with listening) → writing. In this way, reading naturally occupies the central position in the sequence, influencing and even determining both the preceding and the following activities, while allowing for the simultaneous and balanced development of listening, speaking and writing.

It should be noted that as to class-time spent, reading itself takes probably the shortest part of it while the greatest part is allocated to speaking and listening. This does not weaken or slow down the development of reading skills (the focal ones) since a lot can be read in a short time if effective reading strategies are used and reading is done not only in class but also at home. In addition, it should not be forgotten that in integrated-skills instruction every skill being developed contributes to development of other skills as listening leads to reading and discussion and so forth (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

Therefore, the suggested approach seems not only reasonable but probably one of the best for attaining desired results in teaching ESP where class-time is limited and where the goal is both to develop students' skills for reading professional literature and to develop the skills of listening, speaking, and writing in professional situations. This approach has really proven its efficiency in our practical experience of using it at Dniepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport—especially when compared to more traditional approaches for tertiary institutions of the former USSR countries.

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