Integrated Skills in Online Technical English Classes

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Abstract:
In this paper, we have sought to investigate some specific challenges pertaining to the integration of skills during Technical English online classes, a modern reality that we have recently been confronted with in an unprecedented way in post-communist education. In order to obtain a balanced approach to Technical English learning and teaching, we shall try to identify a number of key aspects that require careful consideration, particularly in respects that make online education different from face-to-face knowledge delivery and acquisition. With a newly emerging reality of online educational dependency, we seek to analyse how online education can become a competitive approach to content delivery and skills formation rather than a compromise on educational goals and results. The paper will also focus on identifying the major shifts in technical students' needs, goals and expectations in the post-communist age and how they can be tackled during online classes to the best possible outcome.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, Integrated skills, Post-Communist language trends, online technical English.*

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Introduction

In a language teaching and learning, it is of the utmost importance that the four primary skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing be developed to work in tandem with one another as well as with other associated skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning, and usage. Remote education, particularly on topics of technical language, can benefit from an integrated skills approach due to the nature of its outcome, i.e. for students to become integrated into a professional community. Integration is facilitated if and only if former students are accustomed to reacting to content verbally or in writing, if they are able to produce meaningful technical solutions, analyse ideas and crystallyse findings into opinions and epress them in a professional manner. Pre-communist language instruction used skills segragation to a large extent as it rendered language classes more manageable and it required less effort in terms of planning, delivery of knowledge and particularly because it gave a clearer undestanding of what was being taught during a specific class.

The treatement of skills in segregation, however, is contrary to the integrated way that people use language skills in everyday communication, and it clashes with the direction in which language teaching scholars have been moving in recent years. Particularly for technical English classes carried out in remote learning mode, the development of skills in isolation is far from satisfactory since the ultimate goal of the technical student is to become integrated into a hyper-specialized community of professionals with whom interaction is part of the job description. Thus, the focus of language classes should be on developing the students' skills in an operative manner, with a view to facilitating their integration by providing them with the ability to understand and react to specialized content, to recalibrate actions and reactions and ensure social and professional cooperation, teamwork and task management.

In Favour of an Integrated Skills Approach

With the advent of globalization and free travel and movement along with the emergence of English as the new *lingua franca,* there has been serious concern and conviction that preparing technical students in segregates skills classes will no longer suffice in preparing them for communication in the newly emerging borderless environment. Moreover, as future members of the international scientific community technical students find themselves in need of a skill-set composed of technical abilities (comprehension and usage of jargon, technical tasks management, technical argumentation and description etc.) alongside social skills (negotiating, summarizing, expanding, persuasive argumentation, team work etc).

Since the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) represent the manner in which language is used for communication (Richards & Schmidt: 2002), target language skills will be used in professional life in integration to ensure optimal functioning of the individual in a community. As the term *skill* demonstrates, the manner in which language is use by learners is perfectible through practice and effective use of resources. During the communist period, the four language skills were most often tackled in isolation, probably due to the precedence of the traditional language teaching methods, namely the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Structuralism Approach, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach. Moreover, teaching traditions relied heavily on the predominant role of the teacher during instruction as deliverer of knowledge with very little focus on students' production capabilities. Or, as Dubin and

Olshtain (1986) pointed out, the language was approached as an end in itself rather than a means to an end, i.e., the authentic interaction and communication with a view to fulfilling specific social functions.

The integrated-skills teaching pedagogy specific to the post-communist education of the last three decades has been associated to a more natural learning approach because it enables the development of genuine communicative skills in foreign language students (Pardede: 2017). Davies and Pearse (2002: 99) correctly emphasized that "*Real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom.*" Failure to communicate in the foreign language only goes to show that approaching skills in segregation will hinder the outcome of communication in the foreign language as we often witness students who are capable of writing with great accuracy and display excellent reading comprehension yet experience great difficulty with listening comprehension or speaking when travelling, working or living in a foreign country.

Skills Segregation versus Skills Integration in Remote Learning

Distance learning, also referred to as remote learning or online education in the globalized world of the Internet has brought about a number of specific challenges for language teachers and technical students alike. Technology is unprecedentedly being used to deliver learning and improve skill both from the perspective of teaching materials creation as well as from the perspective of delivery, communication and teacher-student/ student-student interaction. Teaching materials are now relying heavily on genuine video/audio/written content produced by native or non-native speakers, students have the opportunity to practice speaking with speakers from all over the world, teachers can easily access world banks of teaching materials and engage in peer collaboration to improve teaching methods and techniques. This dynamic environment for educational delivery and constructive feedback sets the background for an integrated skills approach during online language classes and infuses the new learning environment with a fresh burst of energy.

The skills segregation approach that dominated the70s and 80s relied heavily on the assumption that teaching was much more manageable if lessons were organized around one dominant and often singular skill and focused on it for a period of time, thus obtaining an in-depth immersion of the student into it. For technical classes, in particular, there was a common misconception that by simply exposing students to technical reading or listening material packed with jargon would make students operational in technical English. Most teachers also believed that by focusing on one skill separately from the others would ensure thorough skill development and that focusing on more than one at a time can be an impossible endeavour from an instructional point of view (Oxford: 2001). Such beliefs might have been brought about by the notion that teaching language skills separately would make the learners an 'accurate' user of language (Klimova: 2014:88) because the approach allows students to gain complete command over one particular language skill that was given attention to. Tajzad and Namaghi (2014) pointed out that even though segregated skills styles might help students improve their knowledge of the language, it does not empower them with the ability to use the skill in actual communication. In that view, according to Pardede (2017:218) "*To enable the EFL students to develop their knowledge of English and their competence to use it in real communication, implementing the integrative skills approach is unavoidable*". Similarly, Oxford (2001) agreed that although it is possible to

focus on one or two skills in absence of the others during classroom activities, discrete skill approach would fall short of preparing the learners for academic, job oriented or day-to-day communication.Pysarchyk and Yamshynska (2015:79) added that "*In the real life each person can't use reading, listening, writing skills in isolation. All these skills serve as a bridge that connects a person with a society.[...] Integrating skills is essential for communicative competence that is the main aim of learning foreign language, for logical structuring of sentences to express ideas and desires both in oral and written form.*" Therefore, if communicative competence is the ultimate goal of language classes, integrating multiple skills into the instructional process is what teachers should do.

As demonstrated by a great number of scholars in the last two decades (Sanchez: 2000; Bose: 2003; Dawid: 2004; Askildson: 2008; Akram & Malik: 2018; Mitrofanova & Chemezov: 2011) skills integration will benefit learners and teachers equally as this approach will inspire teachers to create variations of the learning activities, enable learners to employ the learned language genuinely and passionately, enhance students' ability to express their thoughts and take on challenges in employing the language, while effectively improving learning outcomes from the communicative point of view. With remote learning, these advantages are additionally enhanced by the students' ability to resort to unlimited banks of resources provided by internet access: dictionaries, video tutorials,glossaries, community interaction, discussion forums etc. Additionally, students' access to specialized communities of leaners and/or professionals has been made possible by the advent of the internet and has harness an environment of free ideas exchange, has set new standards for students to achieve and has provided a much desired stimulus for self-improvement and learning autonomy. Therefore, an integrated skills approach to technical online classes is desirable if students are to develop and improve internal knowledge independentlyof English alongside their linguistic accuracy and performance.

Moreover, the integrated skills approach seems to be most effective because it seeks to teach language as a means of communication to serve the purpose it was originally created for, which can be motivating and realistic as well (Brown: 2001; Tsung-Yuan & Oxford: 2002). In remote learning this may translate into becoming a functional member of a specialized professional or learning community, it can ensure integration and progress in the learning process, provide instant feedback and correction, ensure emergence into the target language culture, incorporation of and adherence to target language cultural, economic, trade and societal. Moreover, learning is no longer confined to the classroom (be it physical or virtual) but it stretches to involve the students into a community of shared values and interests, activated by curiosity and unhindered access to people and resources that were not available in traditional education.

Raimes (1983) argued that in order to make language learning classes as close as possible to real-life communicative situations, there is stringent need for activities that allow students use all the language skills in the same way they would use them in their mother tongue. For example, in remote learning students are expected to react dynamically to content rather than merely access it to resolve a static task. Moreover, students are empowered to listen or read attentively in order to react, to negotiate, readjust and refine their standpoint, ask for or provide additional details in the same way they would if the interaction occurred in their mother tongue. As Richards and Schmidt (2002:262) pointed out, "*integrated approach is the teaching of the language skills of*

reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in conjunction with each other, as when a lesson involves activities that relate listening and speaking to reading and writing". Consequently, as the skills are approached interactively, the development of one particular skill will lead to the development of multiple other skills working in conjunction with one another to create response or reaction, societal integration and collaboration. The use of a single skill in isolation would be improbable if not impossible to produce such resultsbecause every time people engage in conversation, in interaction with another person, they are listening as well as speaking in a continuous flow from one to the other. Hersan (1998: 22) pointed out that in daily life the four language skills "*are seen in integration … So, in the classroom, the activities should be taught in integration in order to arrive at ease in communication.*" And, we might add, when people connect with one another, this entails input and output must flow both ways with exposure, reaction, readjustment and action in a continuous cycle.

Benefits of the Integrated Skills Approach in Online Technical Education

As remote learning is becoming increasingly dominant in the age of the Internet, we have sought to investigate how the integrated skills approach fits into the online framework of skills development for students of English. The key distinctions between face-to-face education delivery and remote education have forced teachers to adapt to a faster results-oriented approach to language teaching in which the development of skill takes precedence over mere content delivery and teacher-centered classes. Moreover, the students of today are particularly interested in key-skills development as they no longer study with an interest in language for the sake of language, but rather because they want to achieve a number of objectives with the language they learn: to study abroad, to get a job, to move house and blend into a new culture, to travel etc. It is, therefore, visible to the naked eye that they rush into foreign language autonomy and wish to develop the communication skills that will ensure such autonomy as quickly as possible. Furthermore, most of the significant content they access in view of attaining their objectives is available mainly in English, which entails they already possess some skills and wish to enlarge upon them. Particularly for technical students engaged in remote learning, there are large banks of tutorials, handouts, visual and listening material that they can easily access and often do so outside the language class.

Based on some benefits mentioned by Carols (1990: 73-74) and to a more recent literature overview as provided by Kebede (2013) we have identified and further elaborated on the key advantages of integrated skills teaching that should provide useful in online education for technical purposes. We shall derive from them with some explicit ramifications and practical observations:

1. **It ensures more purposeful and meaningful learning** at all proficiency level. Most of the times, when skills are approached in a segregated manner, students are under the impression they can only tackle one skill at a time because this is the learning style they are accustomed to in individuality. But, when experienced with learning in multi-skills classes, the learning style they have absorbed makes them aware that after reading or listening they will do something with information obtained (be it ideas or items of vocabulary), they will need to react to it and put it to good use to achieve communication with peers. They will feel comfortable achieving communicative goals based on their

mindset's acknowledgement of communicative purposes associated to the language learned.

Example: Integrating speaking/ writing into reading

The task of having to read a technical text thoroughly can be furthered in view of: creating a debate; arguing if favour or against the main ideas mentioned in the text; expanding the time frame further with *What would you do next?* questions; using key vocabulary items in a personal account of the text content etc.

2. **Consistent teaching** and **better communication are ensured**. Skills integration provides **continuity** in the process of teaching-learning as in this approach tasks are closely related to each other. When exposed to informational input through receptive skills such as reading or listening, students are expected to react to it with productive skills such as speaking or in writing, answer comprehension questions, fill gaps or write a responsive paragraph to a newly introduced concept. In the next stage, they may be asked to express an opinion about the ideas of the text, replicate grammar or phraseological structures in a spoken/written paragraph, create word families for specific vocabulary items, imagine being in a specific role and voice out/react/explore the implications of specific behaviours. Thus, continuity is ensured throughout the lesson and students absorb the input ideas/vocabulary/phrases and put them to good use to create communicative output. As a result, it develops much-needed transferable skills that students can repurpose and remap onto a number of situations they will encounter in their field of professional activity, thus increasing communicative achievement and confidence.

3. **Variety and collaborationare brought into the classroom**, enabling teachers to enrich classroom instruction by integrating language skills cooperatively. Skills integration **boosts confidence** and can **ensure learning autonomy and team-work**, which is, in fact, the ultimate goal of any good teaching methodology. How can it do that? By simply empowering students to feel they can tackle input regardless of its challenging nature and create output in a variety of forms. Variety can be ensured by the intelligent alternation of receptive skills with productive skills, by turn taking and roles exchange, by using increasing level of difficulty for input etc.Students learn to handle tasks collaboratively, draw inspiration from peers and formulate better answers, enrich ideas produced by peers and contribute to class interaction more open-heartedly. Additionally, the output derived from collaboration will be an example of mitigation strategies, finding middle ground and negotiating put to use .

4. Language learning with integrated skills **resembles** the way people operate in **real life**. As part of a human society, we see, read, hear things and we are expected to react, to create something based on the newly acquired information, to adapt to it, to act out, to report it based on our understanding and capabilities, to voice an opinion. When we create input for others, the cycle starts over with different roles assigned to different actors. Similarly, the integrated skills learning approach will train students to play a variety of communicative and technical roles in class as preparation for what they will encounter in target language life situations.

5. **It develops** students' **communicative competence**: grammatical/linguistic competence, strategic competence, socio-linguistic competence and discourse competence. Lessons relying on the integrated skills approach can be creatively designed to provide **input before output**, which increases self-confidence, idea generation and willingness to express opinions.

   For instance, the teacher can elicit new vocabulary with a reading activity paralleled with listening and in the second stage of the lesson students can be tasked to use some specific vocabulary items provided to articulate a response to an idea or concept in a guided speaking activity or in a paragraph/ report/essay writing task.

6. **Provides exposure to authentic language** learning environment so that students can **interact** naturally in the target language. It ensures **realistic learning** as skills integration allows for the development of four skills within a real-life communicative framework. Language skills integration provides more purposeful and meaningful learning as students are exposed to genuine learning situations that make them feel integrated into a professionalenvironment, react to real-life situations and understand what is expected of them when faced with a particular scenario. Moreover, the language they are learning is actually put to use with the aim to provide reactions from them rather than merely expose students to content, which increases its meaningfulness and ensures long-term retention.

7. **It can develop students' critical thinking** so that they can analyze, synthesize and evaluate information better, enabling them to practise language skills successfully. The integrated skills approach draws the student away from being fed target language structures and activates their processing power by enabling them to produce output creatively in a manner that is adapted to students' level. Additionally, they can elicit and internalize an understanding of inherent target language rules, stuctures and replicate observed language patterns in conversations, create their own language items based on patterns etc.

8. **It increases motivation** in students and **boosts learning morale** by drifting away from a routine language practice that often results in boredom and loss of interventional motivation. Integrated skills in remote learning provide opportunities to meaningfully **introduce** and **reuse** the language and structures learned by students in a variety of contexts and modes and it can be valuable for increasing intrinsic motivation as it allows for the recycling and revision of language which has already been taught. For example, when students are exposed to the definition of a concept in a reading or listening activity they will be able to replicate the structures used for defining concepts for their own needs and should be encouraged to do so for a number of different concepts. Thus, they will develop the confidence that they can later on define, explain andrefine other work-related concepts. Or, when students listen to native speakers sequencing their speech with linking phrases, discourse markers or hedging devices they will apply similar linking/ hedging strategies to sequence their own ideas immediately as part of a task and as part of their future spoken or written statements. Moreover, while interacting with peers in a like-minded community, students will be equipped to expand learning, provide and receive feedback, become autonomous and confident as the community validates their contribution.

9. **It provides a student-centeredand a humanistic approach** to language teaching and learning. When genuine content from the target language culture is provided, students become familiar with a variety of cultural, economic and professional realities that exist worldwide. Moreover, with integrated skills put to good use, students are faced with the challenge of debating, negotiating and rethinking some previous concepts and ideas that they inherited from their own culture and reintegrate them into a globalized culture. Not only will students thus feel empowered to become part of the target language culture, but they will also increase their conceptual flexibility, cultural tolerance and easy integration in a complementary universe endowed with people from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds. Moreover, students can achieve their goals in cooperation with like-minded students with whom they share a common purpose, interest and outcome.

Conclusion

Using an integrated skills approach entails that language should be treated as a mode of interaction rather than an academic study subject. Thus,technical students will benefit from an increase in the motivation to learn a language if they feel they are able to use it to interact, rather than to merely possess knowledge about the language. It has the potential to empowertechnical students to use their target language strengths to grow into future professionals that are perfectly apt to employ language skills to optimally operate in a community of people with a shared interest, similar capabilities and an aim to succeed professionally.

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