

Integrated Teaching Strategy in the Reading Classroom

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Abstract

Integration in language instruction still remains an elusive, if not an impossible, goal. In describing integrated literacy instruction, Shanahan (1997) writes: "Given the long history and nearly universal acceptance of the idea of integration, there have been few empirical investigations of its effects. I have been able to identify no study, in any field with any age level, which has clearly demonstrated more coherent or deeper understandings, or better applicability of learning as a result of integration" (p. 15). One possible cause could be that research on ESL as well as classroom teachers have focused attention on the larger, rather than the narrower and more important aspects of instruction. Many have emphasized the importance of the interrelationships among the language arts. For example, Morrow, Pressley, Smith, and Smith (1997) argue that an integrated approach helps young children see that what they learn in one domain can transfer to another. Many other researches have been conducted in pursuit of similar goals. This paper assumes that if we are to be successful in a larger context of integration, such as an integrated program level and transfer of learning as a result of integration, we need to look at the smaller context such as integration of related skill in every academic subject in school. This paper will discuss an evidence-based and practical classroom strategy that enhances the integration of Reading skills by creating experiences that enhance learning. The paper aims to answer the following pedagogical questions in the context of cooperative learning environment. How can integration be achieved in the context of classroom Reading. How does transfer of skills assist in an effective integration of reading skills to enhance learning.

Keywords: integrated skills, reading instruction, creative learning experience

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Introduction

Reading in the classroom has remained one of the most difficult aspects of second or foreign language instruction especially with the advent of visuals in media technology. Online communication, which is flooded by colors, visuals and sounds, continues to eat up a lot of students' time and continues to compete with essential reading time. Despite rapid advancement in other areas of communication, skillful reading remains in education and is highly rewarded in modern society. Advances in Second Language Reading research have brought attention to the complex array of skills which constitute L2 reading proficiency as to issues surrounding the development of reading proficiency.

This paper introduces a Reading Strategy the speaker has been using in the classroom, an activity that uses the integrated skills approach. The integrated skills approach allows student interaction and participation in the Reading process and makes possible the transfer of learning skills from reading to communication which is the end goal of language learning.

Reading is an Active Skill

Since Lado's categorization of the language skills into either passive or active, Reading has been identified as a passive skill – despite counter arguments thrown against it. This paper argues that Reading, as a classroom activity, is not a passive skill because of the fact that students constantly interact with the written text. It involves a number of micro and macro skills that allows the student to interact with the printed material in order for comprehension to occur. Here are some examples of the micro skills of Reading: ① figure out the meaning of words, ②acquire vocabulary, ③pick out key words in the text, and ④get the main idea from the information: Comprehension is a cognitive process. Some macro reading skills include ①recognizing rhetorical forms of written discourse for interpretation, ②inferring context that is not explicitly by using background knowledge, and ③inferring links and connections from described events, establishing relationships, cause and effects and several other cognitive activities.

In addition to these, a summary of the five essential components of Reading reminds us of the complexity of tasks Reading demands of the students. First, Reading requires phonemic awareness, the knowledge and manipulation of sounds in spoken words.

Reading for comprehension also requires Phonics, the relationship between written and spoken letters and sounds. Furthermore there is the problem of Reading fluency including oral reading skills. The problem of poor comprehension is usually a result of the students' ability to read with accuracy, with appropriate rate, expression, and phrasing. For the students to interact with the printed material, the knowledge of words is very essential. Vocabulary development therefore is essential in reading; it is not just knowledge of words and their definitions. More importantly, it is the ability to use a stock of words and their context into every reading situation that is the stepping stone of a good comprehension. Reading skills, therefore, are specific abilities that enable a reader to read the written form as a meaningful language. We also allow for reading any printed material written with independence, comprehension and fluency. In so doing, the students mentally interact with the message. In lieu of this, the act of reading cannot be considered a passive activity.

Reading and the Tapestry of Language Learning

At this point it is important to mention one important concept of second/ foreign language teaching. One image associated for teaching English as a second or foreign language is that of a tapestry (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). The tapestry of language learning is woven from many strands, such as the characteristics of the teacher, the learner, the setting or learning condition, and the conditions for relevant languages (i.e., English and the native languages of the learners and the teacher). The learner creates the second language much as the weaver creates the tapestry. The learners' needs and purposes are fundamental to the development of the learner's language just as the weaver's needs and purposes. For the instructional loom to produce a large, strong, beautiful, colorful tapestry, all of these strands must be interwoven in positive ways. For example, the instructor's teaching style must address the learning style of the learner, the learner must be motivated, and the setting must provide resources and values that strongly support the teaching of the language. However, if the strands are not woven together effectively, the instructional loom is likely to produce something weak, ragged, and unattractive, not recognizable as a tapestry at all. If this weaving together does not occur, the strand consists merely of discrete segregated skills – parallel threads that do not touch, support or interact with each other. The results of segregated skills instruction in poorly woven tapestry highlights the advantages of integrating the skills and move toward improving teaching and learning a second or foreign language.

In addition to the four strands mentioned above--teacher, learner, setting, and relevant languages--other important strands exist in the tapestry. In a practical sense, one of the most crucial of these strands consists of the four primary skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. This strand also includes associated or related skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning, and usage. When the skills are adequately interwoven during instruction, the skills strand of the tapestry leads to optimal ESL/EFL communication and language learning. One way this is made possible is through the integrated-skills approach.

Integrated Skills Instruction

Two types of integrated-skill instruction that are worth mentioning are either the content-based language instruction and task-based instruction. The first of these emphasizes learning content through language, while the second stresses doing tasks that require communicative language use (Khand & Ahmed, 2010). Both of these benefit from a diverse range of materials, textbooks, and technologies for the ESL or EFL classroom. In content-based instruction, students practice all the language skills in a highly integrated, communicative fashion while learning content such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Content-based language instruction is valuable at all levels of proficiency, but the nature of the content might differ by proficiency level. In task-based instruction, students participate in communicative tasks in English. Varied activities such as pair work and group work are often used to increase student interaction and collaboration. In writing classes for instance, students work together to write, edit or produce a class newspaper.

In highly advanced communication classes, students develop a television commercial, enact scenes from a play, or take part in other joint tasks. More structured cooperative learning formats can also be used in task-based instruction. The nature of the tasks varies and the tasks are carefully selected and implemented to suit the language proficiency of the learners. Tasks are defined as activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that require comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). The task-based model has begun to influence not just the teaching of ESL and EFL but the measurement of learning strategies as well.

A Task-based Strategy in Teaching Reading

The reading strategy to be introduced here involves two stages: the planning stage and the hands-on implementation stage.

The planning stage: The first stage occurs on the first or second class session at the beginning of the semester. The class is split into groups of four, and students are allowed to meet the members of the group and get to know each other. In this stage the students plans and assigns the leader for each week of the four weeks to follow. Each leader has the following responsibilities. He is to bring to class a short article – one page long, if without photos, and two pages at the longest, if with photos. The article could be any topic of interest to the leader. The difficulty level is to controlled. This means that if the leader chooses an article, he should be able to prepare at least three comprehension questions and must be able to answer these questions. Most importantly, the leader must not be absent on the assigned day. With this it is important that the members take each other's contact number, and should contact each other to switch roles in case of emergency.

The implementation stage: The implementation stage happens at the first twenty minutes of each reading lesson when this activity is conducted. Students are instructed to take turns reading the article aloud. The purpose is for every member to check for correct pronunciation and reading of new and unfamiliar words. The students are encouraged to help each other, and the leader must be able to save the group when all things fail. After the group has checked for vocabulary, the leader asks the comprehension questions that include not only 3W's. The questions should include most importantly the "Why" and "How". In most cases, students finish answering the comprehension questions and move on to culture expansion of the theme of the day's reading.

The teacher is expected to receive a copy of the reading material from all the leaders in the beginning of the class. The teacher reads through these while students are busy with their own reading. The teacher gives comments to the leader, if necessary, and goes around during the session to see if things are going well with each group. Each session ends when the members have all agreed on the correct answers to the questions, and have written down a feedback for the day's session.

Obviously, this strate3gy engages each member of the class to participate in the reading process and be responsible for their own and the other members' reading.

Reading skills are integrated, and checked in a way that learners move from the fundamental skills of word recognition to more advanced skill of discussing the theme in relation to their own culture context. In so doing, the language skills are integrated in a way that reading starts with interaction with the printed material and ends with a communicative task. Oral Reading gives students time to check certain fundamental skills used in every application, which is letter recognition. From there, learners move on to the next advanced stage of reading. Given different comprehension questions each lesson time, students develop the ability to deal with more advanced skills such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, predicting and making associations. In every session students work their way up the linguistic chain from morphemes (parts and sounds of words) to semantics (meaning) and syntactics (grammatical construction) until they finally arrive at understanding socio cultural kinds of discourse. Needless to say, students plan and are responsible for their own learning. Because of its integrated nature – due to the fact that reading strategy enhances performance in multiple skills – transfer of learning skills becomes possible.

Conclusion

The Reading strategy introduced here uses the integrated skills approach to enhance learning. The essence of this approach lies in the integration of skills within the Reading strand and an integration of Reading and other language skills through transfer of skills. The students move on from interacting with the printed material to Oral Communication. The task requires comprehending, producing and manipulating language. At the same time, it induces student interaction and collaboration.

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