

Traditional and Modern Skills

This paper reviews past and current developments, in our profession's view of the four principal language skills. It begins by considering the traditional analysis of language use into two receptive skills (listening and reading) and two productive skills (speaking and writing). It then outlines alternatives to this conventional four-way division: first, the claim that most communication involves the integration of skills, rather than their discrete use; and then, the view that language use involves three or five skills, as opposed to four. The final section of the paper discusses specific new skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing that language learners need to acquire and master in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

The balance between the four traditional language skills has varied over time with changes in theory and pedagogical fashion. In the days of the Grammar-Translation Method of the 18th and 19th centuries the emphasis was on reading and writing of primarily literary materials, with little value attached to listening and speaking. The Direct Method of the early 20th century reversed the balance and accorded principal priority to listening and speaking; efforts were made to prevent translation into the first language, and even to prohibit its use in the classroom.

The Second World War brought a particular need to teach military personnel rapidly to become fluent listeners and speakers of other languages. Drawing on contemporary structural linguistic theory, the US Army developed a method, later known as Audiolingualism, based on behaviourist principles and featured activities that were believed to reinforce good language habits – intensive oral drilling, an emphasis on memorisation, and so on.

Since the 1970s, the general movement towards more communicative approaches to second language teaching has involved acknowledging the need to integrate the four skills rather than regard any as primary. However, some strands of that movement have highlighted the advantages of early primary attention to one skill over others: listening, in the case of Total Physical Response (Asher 1969); reading, in the case of the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983).

Most recently, two decades of technological advance have meant that many language learners – both children and adults – now have access to e-resources allowing them to practise listening and reading in their own time, in ways that

could not have been imagined even 20 years ago. Technology has also, as we shall see, broadened ‘listening’ into ‘viewing’, by making available the visual dimension that is such a vital part of real-life listening (Lynch 2009).

2. Traditional skills

Defining “skills”

Johnson (1996) distilled the nature of skills into six key characteristics. Firstly, skills are **hierarchically organised**, that is, processing language does not work in a purely linear fashion. Secondly, skills are **goal-directed**. A starting point for the use of language is the language user’s wish to communicate a message – the desire to mean (Halliday 1973). Thirdly, skills involve the **evaluation of data** in some form; we now appreciate the mental effort expended by effective listeners or readers, to assess parts of the message. Fourthly, skills involve **selection**. As Johnson (1996) argues, a competent tennis player will have a wide repertoire of strokes available to them, from which they choose an appropriate one, in response to a stroke from their opponent. Fifthly, skilled language use requires **combinatorial skill**. When replying to a question, a speaker has to produce a response well formed in terms of syntax, phonology and semantics. Finally, skilled language use is **non-stereotyped**. Every communicative act – other than conventionalized acts like greeting and thanking – is a new event, partly because it involves the other five features of skill use.

In the rest of this section I will be summarising key features of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Of course, referring to them as (only) four skills is merely short-hand; in reality, each is a bundle of component subskills or microskills.

Listening

Richards (1983) provided a pioneering analysis of the subskills required in different types of listening; he posited 33 microskills for conversational listening and a further 18 for academic listening. His analysis has been influential in helping language teachers to distinguish and prioritise the components of different types of listening. From the pedagogic perspective, skill lists raise the issue of hierarchy, which I referred to earlier, and whether some microskills are more fundamental than others. If so, can we establish an optimal sequence for training those subskills in the classroom?

One study in particular has thrown light on the possible sequencing and priority of the listening microskills. Buck and Tatsuoaka (1998) applied the rule-space statistical technique to testing second language listening. The technique deconstructs test items into cognitive attributes and analyses each candidate’s pattern of responses to calculate their chances of having mastered each attribute. It emerged that virtually all the variance in non-native listeners’ performance on

an EFL test was explained by the listeners' abilities to recognise what constitutes task-relevant information, to scan fast spoken text automatically and in real time, to process a substantial information load, to cope with dense information, to use previous items to locate information, to identify relevant information without explicit markers, to notice and interpret heavy stress, to make text-based inferences, to incorporate background knowledge into text processing, to interpret concepts with no literal equivalent in their first language, to recognise and take advantage of redundancy, to processing information scattered throughout a text, and to construct a response quickly and efficiently (Buck/Tatsuoka 1998: 141-142)

Clearly, those abilities include attributes that could be termed bottom-up, such as noticing stress, and also top-down, for instance, constructing a response. Programmes of listening instruction need to achieve a balance between the two:

A successful listener is not simply someone that is good at compensating for their weaknesses by skilful use of top-down strategies, but someone who also possesses and uses form-oriented L2 listening skills effectively in bottom-up processing. (Lynch/Mendelsohn 2010: 193)

Reading

The equivalent microskills approach to reading has its roots in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain (Bloom *et al.* 1956), which eventually led to the compilation of reading microskills for the second language setting:

- Recognising the script of the language
 - Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar items
 - Understanding explicitly stated information
 - Understanding information not explicitly stated
 - Understanding conceptual meaning
 - Understanding the communicative value of sentences
 - Understanding relations within the sentence
 - Understanding relations between parts of a text through cohesion devices
 - Recognising discourse markers
 - Identifying the main point or key information
 - Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details
 - Extracting relevant points selectively
 - Skimming
 - Scanning for specific information
 - Converting text into graphic form
- (based on Munby 1978: 212f.)

However, Alderson (2000) urges caution: firstly, such lists have often resulted from speculation “in the comfort of the theorist’s armchair” (2000: 11), rather than empirical observation; secondly, they tend to be poorly defined, or

even undefined, and give the impression of being discrete, whereas there can be considerable overlap among skills.

Nevertheless, 30 years on from Munby's work, the now extensive body of research into second language reading allows us to say with reasonable certainty that the following guidelines for teachers "represent component abilities of learners that need to be developed for effective reading comprehension" (Grabe 2006: 282): ensure fluency in word recognition; create a vocabulary-rich environment; activate background knowledge in appropriate ways; ensure effective language knowledge and general comprehension skills; teach text structures and discourse organisation; promote strategic reading rather than individual strategies; build reading fluency and rate; promote extensive reading; and develop intrinsic motivation for reading.

Interestingly, these empirically based guidelines are very similar to recommendations written nearly a century ago by Michael West, as a result of his reflections on teaching English in East Bengal (see West 1926).

Speaking

The component skills that we manipulate when speaking are strongly influenced by the conditions under which we have to speak, and primarily by the time factor: "the words are being spoken as they are being decided and as they are being understood" (Bygate 1987: 11). Bygate divided the subskills of speech into two types: **production skills** and **interaction skills**.

In terms of production, speakers have, firstly, to **facilitate** what they say by simplifying structure (coordination rather than subordination), by ellipsis ("why me?"), by using conventional formulaic expressions ("whatever!") and by fillers and hesitation devices ("like", "you know", "sort of", etc.). Secondly, speakers can **compensate** for production difficulties: since planning time tends to be limited, speakers typically re-phrase and improve what they say after they have said it, or expand and develop the information they have already given.

The fact that normally when we speak we are talking to someone else who can hear us means that effective speakers deploy interaction skills. Good communicators are "good at saying what they want to say in a way which the listener finds understandable" (Bygate 1987: 22), and one way of doing that is to use **routines**. These may be information routines (types of information: narrative, description, and so on) or interaction routines (typical sequences of social interchange, such as greeting-waiting-examination-treatment-payment-leave-taking for a dental appointment). Secondly, **negotiation skills** include the ability to manage interaction, such as knowing when to begin a speaking turn and how to manage the topic of conversation, and the ability to negotiate meaning, which involves 'repairing' the conversation when understanding has broken down. This encapsulates Bygate's analysis of speaking subskills into eight components: the ability to articulate sounds comprehensibly; mastery of

stress, rhythm and intonation; an acceptable degree of fluency; transactional and interpersonal skills; skill in taking short and long speaking turns; skill in the management of interaction; proficiency in negotiating meaning; and interactive listening skills (abridged from Nunan 1989: 32).

Writing

Until the 19th century writing had been the primary means of showing one's ability in another language, but with the advent of Grammar-Translation its role shrank, and there was a shift from literary texts to exemplificatory sentences (Howatt 1984). For much of the 20th century, writing was "the handmaid of the other skills" (Rivers 1968: 241), with a focus on the accuracy of the written product in terms of syntax, lexis, spelling and punctuation.

However, as Cumming (1998) pointed out, the word **writing** has many meanings. It can refer to the process of composing, as in "Sheila found it hard to write the letter to her brother", the social act of discourse, as in "He writes mainly for teenagers", or the product "Her writing is hard to read". Since the 1970s we have seen an emphasis on the **route** to the goal of writing, of going about it the right way. This has highlighted the need to train process subskills (e.g. planning, drafting, reviewing and rewriting). Most recently, the developing notion of **genre** has underlined the importance of developing learners' awareness of audience – meeting readers' expectations as regards content and form. For example, when teaching students to compose formal emails in English involving initial self-introduction, it would be appropriate to explain that in English language contexts it is unnecessary to start the message with "My name is...", since that information will be part of the text the receiver sees – in the "From..." line – and should also be included at the bottom of the message. Other cultures differ in this aspect of the email genre.

This three-dimensional view of writing implies a complex set of skills, from lower psychomotor (letter formation) to higher cognitive (audience appreciation), and the skilled second language writer needs to be able, among other things, to produce graphemes (letters), to write at a rate appropriate for the purpose, to retrieve and produce relevant vocabulary and use appropriate word order patterns, to use morphological systems (e.g. tense and agreement), to express meanings in a variety of grammatical forms, to use cohesive devices such as logical markers for written discourse, to adhere to the conventions of writing (such as address formats in letters), to convey clear connections (e.g. between main idea and supporting idea), to take the audience into account (e.g. when making culturally specific references), and to develop a range of strategies in the process of writing, such as outlining, drafting, and soliciting feedback (Brown 1994: 327).

3. Alternatives

Integrating skills

There was an inherent tension between the desire, typified by Mumby (1978), to isolate the subskills of listening, reading, speaking and writing, and the common observation that our encounters with language – whether our own or another – tend to involve more than one traditional skill at a time.

To take a more theoretical perspective first, Schmitt (2010) has noted a trend from discrete to holistic in applied linguistic research, particularly with the growing recognition of crucial factors in communication, such as social context, affective involvement and the demands of real-time processing:

Taking these and other factors into account gives us a much richer and more accurate account of the way language is actually used and leads to a better description of the knowledge and skills which make up language proficiency. (Schmitt 2010: 11)

In more applied terms, it is now common for second language learners to engage in multi-skill activities, as opposed to those featuring practice in a single language skill. Moreover, even what is labelled as a single-skill lesson, e.g. “Writing a Letter”, may well integrate the skills: pre-reading discussion (listening and speaking), reading of a sample letter (reading), comprehension questions (reading and writing), paired comparison of answers (reading, listening and speaking), drafting of students’ own letters (reading and writing), and peer review (reading, speaking, listening and writing). This sort of integration has been claimed to increase learners’ motivation and to enhance the chances of their active involvement, in the short term, and of improvement of their language skills in the longer term (Al-Hussain 2009).

Three skills?

One reflection of the recognition that language skills should be taught in an integrated fashion is the view that actual language use in fact involves not four skills, but three: **comprehension**, **conversation** and **composition**.

Advocates of this approach argue that **comprehension** – whether listening or reading – draws on the same microskills in different media. These interconnections were the basis of a method for combining listening and reading into three stages (Lund 1991). Learners first listened to a passage to grasp the gist; they then read a transcript, to gain access to linguistic form; and finally they listened again to the whole passage.

Conversation, clearly, combines listening and speaking skills, and effective conversationalists cannot simply be good speakers; they need to attend to the reactions and options of their interlocutors. It was for this reason that Oprandy (1994) coined the term **listening/speaking**, believing that the conventional four-skill division had been an organisational convenience which is no longer

justified, given our growing appreciation of the extent of the symbiosis between listening and speaking.

Finally, **composition** requires the deployment of not only learners' writing skills but also their reading skills – the latter involving the explicit reading of others' texts when we are working on academic writing tasks, and previous experience of reading in the case of non-academic writing tasks.

Five skills?

An alternative to reducing the traditional skills to three is to accept the four skills, but advocate the addition of a fifth. For example, in the 1970s, the rise in the number of international students taking degree courses at English-medium universities led to a dramatic expansion in English for Academic Purposes. Teachers preparing students for study through English realised that 'general' language skills were not enough; some believed that **study skills** had to be added to traditional listening, reading, speaking and writing. However, what they meant by study skills was sometimes limited to what Jordan (1997) calls "reference skills", rather than study skills in its current generic sense, referring to the academic variants of the four traditional skills.

For some, the fifth skill is **translation** (Jin/Cortazzi 2006) or **language use** (García Laborda, Jesús/Navarro Laboulais 2008) – essentially the ability to put into practice the skills that have been acquired or learnt separately. A key role is also attributed to **mediation**. It covers the two activities *translation* and *interpretation* whereby the learner "acts as an intermediary in a face-to-face interaction between two interlocutors who do not share the same language or code" (Council of Europe 2001). Other candidates for the status of the fifth skill include **culture** (Larsen-Freeman 2000) and, with recent advances, **electronic literacy** (Simpson 2005; Taylor *et al.* 2005) and specific abilities such as **blogging/podcasting** (Evans 2006), which we turn to in the next section.

4. Modern skills

A fundamental difference between the world of today's language learners and of previous generations is ease of access to authentic second language texts. In the past, language learners had to rely on material designed for people like them, in the form of textbooks and audio supplements. Today's learners have to be **media literate** – able to "decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce both print and electronic media" (Aufderheide 1997: 79).

One of the leading authors on multi-media skills is Margaret Mackey, who has proposed that we replace **read**, as the generic verb describing how we process a text, with **play** (Mackey 2002). Her notion of playing with a text (print or electronic) embraces various aspects of user involvement: imagining,

performing, engaging with the rules of the game, strategising, orchestrating, interpreting, exploring, and reflecting.

It seems to me that the notion of learners acquiring skills to play with actual or virtual texts is an intriguing one, which I will now briefly explore for each of the language skills in turn.

Listening

Today's digital media offer a wider range of listening sources than were available even a few years ago: podcasts and videocasts, blogs, web-based recording libraries, MP3 players, computer-enhanced language learning materials, and so on. Unlike the single-medium past, many of these media combine spoken word and visual image, and although I have followed convention in heading this section **listening**, we should perhaps really be thinking of a modern skill of **listening/viewing**.

Effective listening/viewing requires the simultaneous interpretation of visual (gestural and facial) information, the speaker's words and ambient sounds. A fully skilled listener/viewer is able to integrate visual signals with the spoken message – a point emphasised in the title of the paper “Listening with your eyes” (Harris 2003). One obvious benefit of the spread of multi-media applications in EFL instruction is the additional support they provide for learners to play with electronic texts as a platform for developing their skills. There is evidence from research into multi-media listening/viewing (e.g. Jones/Plass 2002; Guichon/McLornan 2008) that when learners have the chance to combine listening (to speech and ambient sound), viewing (of the moving image) and reading (of text and graphics) it not only assists their short-term comprehension but also increases their long-term learning.

Similarly, a recent study conducted with Spanish primary school pupils learning English found that those who had the opportunity to listen individually to digital English stories on the Internet achieved greater gains in listening skills than others who listened to conventional materials in textbook-based classes (Ramirez Verdugo/Alonso Belmonte 2007).

Reading

Children now at school have grown up at least as accustomed to reading texts on a screen (computer, mobile or TV) as on the printed page. It has been said that “contemporary new readers have **no other way** of learning about reading except within the context of a background of vast textual experience across many media” (Mackey 2003: 404). But exploiting modern media requires some specific new reading skills, two of which I will briefly discuss: critical reading and corpus reading.

Using the internet as a reading resource is not without its drawbacks; Brandl (2002) discusses three – current limitations on bandwidth, the difficulty of

navigation through hyperlinked texts, and lack of control over quality and accuracy of information. The absence of quality control places a premium on reader judgment, which in turn depends on not only adequate language proficiency but also **critical reading**. The need to critique what one reads is reflected in a range of educational websites that offer guidance in how to assess the reliability and quality of any given internet source. We have a responsibility to help learners become critical appraisers, rather than passive consumers.

Another highly specialised reading skill that tomorrow's language learners (and teachers) will need to develop is the ability to **read the output of corpora**, which are potentially important sources of insight into target language use. Tognini-Bonelli (2001) points to the different reading subskills required to deal with the printout of examples from a corpus, in contrast to a conventional text, such as the ability to read in a fragmented, bottom-up fashion; to read vertically, rather than horizontally; to identify formal patterning of specific elements, rather than for content and argument; and to search for repeated language 'events', rather than unique ones.

Speaking

The aspect of modern speaking that I will focus on is giving presentations using PowerPoint. The last two decades have seen the spread of PowerPoint from its original niche in the corporate world into educational contexts, but its use by pupils and students, as well as by teachers and lecturers, is not uncontroversial. It has, for example, been criticised as a source of "entertainment rather than education of the students" (Szabo/Hastings 2000: 186). Debate centres on whether PowerPoint formats lend themselves to complex topics in an educational setting, as opposed to business presentations "where complex thought must be broken into seven-word chunks, with colourful blobs between them" (Norvig 2003: 343).

My experience of training non-native learners of English to use PowerPoint in academic presentations suggests that the key skill is knowing how to remain in control of the tool, and not allowing the tool to dominate. In particular, it is important to avoid the "sin of triple delivery" (Parker 2001: 5), that is, presenting identical information in three forms – speech, projection and handout. Successful speaking with PowerPoint involves exploiting its facilities (text, graphics, sound, video clips, etc.) to **complement the spoken word** and not to duplicate it.

The other principal skill of speaking with PowerPoint is keeping the attention of the audience on presenter, rather than screen. Often, both presenter and audience stare fixedly at the projection, and even when the presenter asks "Any questions?", the audience continues to stare at the final slide, which shows "Any questions?". Paradoxically, PowerPoint technology makes it even more important than in the past to train learners to use **prosody** (pitch, volume, speed,

stress and intonation) and **body language** to engage listeners' attention, to counter the dominance of the visual (Anderson/Maclean/Lynch 2004).

Writing

The area I will take as 'modern' writing is source-based assignment writing at university, involving such subskills as paraphrasing and summarising, citation and reference skills, and the use of electronic tools such as Endnote and Reference Master. Current internet technologies, online journals and Web 2.0 applications offer students access to a wider range of materials than a few years ago, and Google Scholar and Scopus are perceived to be more convenient channels to sources than traditional electronic indexes, together with course intranets and virtual learning environments.

What is less clear is how this plethora of information may demand new writing skills and practices (Whitley/Grous 2009). In particular, how do new students, unfamiliar with source-based writing from secondary school, acquire the necessary writing skills? How do they learn "to sound appropriately academic"? (East 2005). One answer is by **patchwriting** – "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-to-one synonym-substitutes" (Howard 1993: 213).

Some novice writers adopt patchwriting when they are unsure whether they have understood a particular source text or lack confidence in their own ability to use academic language. Patchwriting is a reasonable strategy, given that learning any new skill includes mimicking competent performers (Introna/Hayes 2007). However, although it can be seen as a necessary stage in a writing apprenticeship, patchwriting risks being perceived as plagiaristic, unless it is accompanied by the appropriate writing subskills. As Pecorari (2003) has argued, it would be better for universities to take a positive skill-training approach to **source acknowledgment** – by teaching students techniques of citation, acknowledgment and referencing – rather than the negative reactive approach of requiring academic staff to use detection software to measure **non-originality** in students' written assignments.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, the skills demanded of foreign language learners are necessarily changing to reflect changes in the use of media and in society in a wider sense. The language teaching profession will need to develop new ways of helping learners to exploit their media literacy – gained from working with first-language print and electronic resources – in order to enhance their learning of the second language. It will not be a question of jettisoning established skill teaching in favour of instruction in the emerging media, but of extending our pedagogic repertoire to include effective instruction in the new skills. The

challenge for language teachers will be to ensure that we ourselves acquire and refine the skills that we need to foster in our students.

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