

Language Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions of the Integrated-skill Approach and its Possible Impact on Learners' Communicative Competence

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Abstract – This research investigates the learners' and teachers' perceptions of the integrated-skill approach and explores the possible impact of this approach on the learners' communicative competence. To gather the required data, a qualitative study was conducted in the faculty of education, English department, University of Misrata/ Libya. Focus group discussions were used with thirteen students, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers. The questions asked were primarily focusing on the approach followed in teaching language skills; integrated or segregated approach, the learners' and teachers' perceptions of these approaches, and their possible influences on learners' competence. The results of this study revealed that there was integration, to some extent, regarding the skills of listening and speaking, and this integration was beneficial in enhancing learners' ability to use English properly. Whereas; the segregated-skill approach adopted to teach reading and writing was not effective as it led students to focus on some language elements such as vocabulary, following memorization techniques without paying any attention to authentic practice. Therefore, it is recommended that educators and policy makers consider students' needs and the possible impact of this approach on students' communicative competence, by advocating to the integrated-skill approach.

Keywords – Integrated-Skill Approach, Perception, Impact, Communicative Competence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Overtime, there has been a lot of research to determine the more effective approaches and methods to teach English as a second/ foreign language. Harmer (2007, cited in Bastias, 2011) [1] states that any of the four skills of English is rarely done in isolation; when people are engaged in conversation, they are listening as well as speaking in order to interact with the person they are talking to. In the case of lectures, students read notes they have written previously and, in the same situation, they are taking their new notes down as they listen to their lecturers

1.1 Statement of the Problem

A lot of research shows that the integration of language skills does not often exist in EFL classrooms; where each skill is taught in isolation, and more focus is given to sub-skills such as grammar and vocabulary. A study conducted by Iftikhar & Aslam (2017) [2] revealed that language skills have not been mixed and integrated in the local schools where the research took place; thus, this lack of integration has led to ineffective abilities of the learners when they take part in the practical life. According to Huang (2004) [3], the separation of skills leads to focusing not on the macro but the micro skills such as, grammar and vocabulary; consequently, memorization would play a significant role in these kinds of classes, and motivation as well as interest would be discouraged.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The research is conducted to investigate the following:

- 1- The perceptions of students and teachers toward the way of teaching language skills at the Faculty of Education (Whether Integrated or Segregated-skill Approach).
- 2- The possible effects of the existence and absence of the skills integration on the development of learners' communicative competence in the Faculty of Education.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study will assist language teachers and learners identify their perceptions of skills integration/ segregation, and realize the fact that the achievement of meaningful communication in the daily life requires all the language skills together. Hence, to learn a second/foreign language, one needs to consider that language is not only a part of an academic work, focusing only on isolated skills, rather, a chance to participate in almost real situations, in which all the language skills are needed. (Hinkel, cited in Harmer, 2001) [4].

II. THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Integrated-skill Approach

The idea of integrated-skill Approach is based on the concept that in natural experiences, oral and written languages are not separated from each another. However, they often occur together, integrated in specific communication events (Peregoy & Boyle 2001, as cited in Ya-Chen, 2007) [5]. Accordingly, this concept is supported by Tolstykh and Khomutova (2012) [6] as they claim that the speed of the modern world development pushes English teachers to adapt new methods of teaching. With cautious planning, any teacher can integrate the language skills and strengthen the way of teaching. They claim that there are two types of integrated-skill instructions: Content-based language instruction and task-based instruction. The first emphasizes the integration of the four skills in a communicative way led by specific content such as mathematics, science, etc., and the other highlights the role of tasks where students – usually with the use of pair-work or group work- are engaged in finishing an assignment such as editing a newspaper article.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Harmer (2001) [4] confirms that one of the teacher's responsibilities in the class is to offer a chance for their students to practice all the skills. As Harmer finds the separation of skills non-existing in real life, he points out that, "someone who listens to a lecture may take notes and then write a report of the lecture. The same person might also describe the lecture to his friends or colleagues and follow it up by reading an article that the lecturer suggested" (p. 47).

Many researchers assert the important role the Integrated-skill Approach plays in enhancing students' competence and performance. A research done by Bastias et al (2011) [1], which observed two different classes of the same level in different schools, showed that the students who were taught by integrating the skills had very good results of a national test which is taken in order to measure their level of proficiency. On the other hand, the class where the integration of skills was not practised did not show good proficiency of students; and thus, they received poor results.

2.2 The Segregated-skill Approach

Nowadays, many institutions and educators separate language skills from each other and, traditionally, teach each one in isolation. They think it is easier for the learners to concentrate on each skill alone or it may be impossible to apply all language skills in one lesson. This way of instruction appeared to have a number of problems conflicting the natural way of learning.

Oxford (2001) [7] agrees with the idea that this method can be easier though insufficient to help learners to communicate effectively. She adds that this segregation may hinder success in academic communication and career-related language use, or simply the usual everyday interaction. Moreover, aspects like motivation, interest and class participation are decreased as a result of following such a breakable and "non-communicative" approach (Huang, 2004) [3]. In the same study, Huang adds that students' mere worries and concentration are greatly focusing only on the grammatical components of language and memorization of words due to the common use of the segregated-skill approach and focusing on the discrete units of language by many teachers. He elaborates on this view as he states:

Separate-skill classes sometimes end up concentrating on subsidiary skills like grammar and vocabulary, even though the course title refers to one of the main language skills (listening, reading, speaking, or writing). With a mandate to teach a reading or listening course, teachers desperately focus on concrete items such as vocabulary expressions and grammar points... Memorization rather than understanding is the primary process students are involved in these kinds of classes (p.221).

Other studies regarding the use of the segregated skill approach have proved that this way of instruction is the core base of the audio-lingual method where the focus is merely on substitution drills and mastery of grammatical structures. Learners who are taught by this method are not successful in interacting with others in English and become communicatively incompetent (Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014) [8].

For the numerous reasons listed above, all language skills must be integrated. As Tajzad and Namaghi identify, "To study a language, you may need to break the language into parts. To use it, however, the skills and components must be integrated". (p.93)

2.3 Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to the level of language learning that enables language users to convey their messages to others and to understand others' messages within specific contexts. It also implies the language learners' ability to relate what is learnt in the classroom to the outside world (Hymes 1972, cited in Vongxay, 2013) [9].

2.4 Impact of the Integrated-skill Approach on Learners' Communicative Competence

The ability to use language properly and effectively is the goal of any teacher who is teaching English and wishes to see their students use English correctly and in an appropriate manner. In relation to this description, Hymes (1972, cited in Vongxay, 2013) [9] proposes the concept (communicative competence) which he explains as knowing the rules of grammar and producing utterances correctly is not enough in order for a learner to use the language effectively, he needs to use and apply this knowledge of grammar in a suitable context. According to Ying (2010, cited in Vongxay, 2013) [9], communicative competence is the capability of language learners to practise language in a successful way in the outside world.

Some researchers found that integrating language skills can assist learners in developing their communicative competence. Acram & Malik (2010) [10] state that, "In real life we...use more than one language skill for communication. Integration of the four skills emphasizes the focus on realistic language and can help the LT_s (language teachers) develop communicative competence (among students)"

On the other hand, the lack of the integrated approach and following the traditional way in teaching can hinder the development of the learners' communicative competence. Byram (2000, cited in Abdulkader, 2016) [11] emphasizes that the use of the audio-lingual method does not give opportunity to learners to apply what they have learned in the outside real world or even developing their communicative competence. Another study that supports this argument against the audio-lingual method was conducted by Tajzad and Namaghi (2014) [8]. They point out that, "Although the Audio-lingual learners knew isolated skills, they were not able to communicate their thoughts in English and they were not communicatively competent" (p. 92).

2.5 Integrated-skill Approach Related Activities

Adopting the integrated skill approach and applying it in the language classroom has led the teachers to think about the appropriate ways of how the skills can be integrated and what skills can possibly be taught together. Some skills are naturally found in integration in real life such as listening and speaking, or reading a letter and writing a response to it. This natural way of how skills occur in life can also be used in the same manner in the classroom. Hence, integration can take many forms. One suggested by Baturay and Akar (2007: 22) [12] in which they state that, "The reading material may serve as a basis for oral presentations; some may be dramatized in role-plays and some may provide a setting for discussions and debates on the same theme and so on". In fact, teaching listening together with reading is regarded as an effective instruction; it helps with enriching students with sufficient amount of language needed for speaking and writing. (Dubin & Olshtain, 1987, cited in Baturay & Akar, 2007) [12]. In addition, Tavit (2010) [13] explains that when learners work on an information-gap task, each group of learners lacks a piece of information which they need to obtain by listening and speaking with the other group of learners in order to complete the task.

In an attempt to avoid the boredom and follow a more stimulating way of teaching reading and writing, Cho and Griffler (2015) [14] conducted a study which used the following teaching program. The first step: ask students to read a part of the story, identify the significant ideas, and paraphrase the main ideas in a paper. The second step: ask students to choose the most significant ideas from step 1. The final step: ask students to write a summary and their viewpoint. Thus, the followed teaching way covers a wide range of reading and writing skills: comprehending the text, identifying and paraphrasing the main ideas, organizing ideas, summarizing the text, and providing their views. It encourages students to constantly read the passages many times before, during and after performing the tasks. As a result, the students who were taught for weeks using this program showed very good performance in the integrated reading and writing tests; however, their marks in multiple-choice reading tests (whose questions evolved around comprehension only) were not satisfactory.

Based on what has been presented previously, Shanahan and Lomax (1986, cited in Cho & Griffler, 2015) [14] investigated three theoretical models: the interactive model (reading affects writing and writing affects reading), the reading-to-writing model (reading knowledge affects writing but not the other way around), and the writing-to-reading model (writing affects reading but reading does not affect writing). They draw a conclusion that the interactive model has explained the data better than the reading-to-writing model and the writing-to-reading model.

2.6 Research Hypothesis

On the whole, it could be drawn from the related literature that the absence of the integrated-skill Approach can adversely affect the students' communicative competence.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

Since the main objective of this research is to investigate the students' and teachers' perceptions toward the way of teaching language skills (integrated or segregated) at the Faculty of Education, the research employed a qualitative framework to explore their opinions, as this approach emphasizes people's social interaction, their feelings about an issue and how they experience a situation. (Robson, 2011, cited in Gahadi, 2015) [15].

3.2 Research Tools

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with teachers, and focus group discussions FGD, with students. FGD was used because it is more appropriate than individual interviews when there is a big number of participants. In fact, a Focus Group Discussion includes many interviewees and, according to Krueger & Casey (2000: 5) [16], it can be defined as "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment". They (Krueger & Casey) point out that Focus Group Discussions (FGD) creates a comfortable atmosphere in which ideas, experiences, and attitudes of participants about a topic are shared. The participants affect and are affected while researchers do many jobs including that of moderator, listener, observer, and eventually inductive analyst.

3.3 Context and Participants

The researchers collected the data through three group discussions consisting of thirteen students of the English department (two groups of five and one group of three), at the Faculty of Education, University of Misurata/Libya. In addition, four teachers, who teach at the same college, were interviewed individually. The students are Libyan and are all females since they are the majority at this college. Besides, all the participating students had already passed language skills subjects successfully, which are: Listening & Speaking 1, 2, 3, 4; Reading 1, 2, 3, 4; Writing 1, 2, 3, 4. The four teachers have been teaching most of the subjects mentioned above. A more detailed description of the participating teachers is presented below:

Name	Gender	Qualification	Nationality	Teaching Experience
P	Male	MA	Indian	4 years at the Faculty of Education

M1	Male	MA	Libyan	6 years at the Faculty of Education
E	female	MA	Libyan	5 years at the Faculty of Education
M2	female	MA	Filipino	10 years at the Faculty of Education

3.4 Research Procedure

The researchers communicated online as well as face-to-face with a number of students asking them to participate in our study, and talked to them about the research outline. Then, a group of teachers, who have the experience of teaching some or all the language skills, were asked to take part in our study. Three students' group discussions were conducted first; each lasted for about forty minutes. Then, four interviews with four individual teachers were held, and each one lasted for about ten minutes.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers led all the individual interviews as well as the group discussions and prepared the questions beforehand. As most of the questions were open-ended, the moderators had to add follow-up questions from time to time for further clarification and details in order to maintain an in-depth understanding of the teachers' and students' perspectives. Regarding to this, Todres and Holloway (2004, cited in Gahadi, 2015) [15] emphasized that the only way to understand a specific situation is by asking questions and discussing the case with those who have experienced it already. All the sessions (except one interview in which the interviewee did not allow any recording) were audio-taped with the permission of the participants. Thus, the collected data was analyzed via a qualitative method which was the thematic approach.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the students' and teachers' views of how language skills are taught in the Faculty of Education (whether integrated or segregated), and what possible effects the Integrated-skill approach may have on the students' performance. The collected data was analyzed and grouped under several themes derived from the participants' responses, and then the gathered data was related to previous findings presented in the literature review.

4.1 Nature of Lessons

Most of the participants showed that some elements of language are not practiced well or sometimes are left out in classes where there is no integration of language elements and skills.

Reading and writing skills are officially separated in our department since they are taught as two different subjects. However; in reading classes, some important exercises and tasks concerning new vocabulary and writing are neglected or not paid enough attention by some teachers.

One student (Batroona) said,

"[in reading classes] we study the new vocabulary in their context and understand it only, but never practice them in our classes. There are no following writing tasks, for example, so we easily forget them"

Another student (Hawa) said,

"when learning vocabulary, we learn a word; its meaning, pronunciation... everything about a word but I did not get benefit... because they are just like a kind of memorization without practice"

Although the material sometimes included some follow-up questions, they are skipped and left out as (Sarah) revealed,

"sometimes, there is a follow-up discussion after reading a passage, or a writing question, but the teacher says: skip it!"

As for the integration of listening and speaking skills, many participants perceived them in different views. Some students said they are integrated and others said they are not. According to (P), a teacher who has experience in teaching all the four language skills, said,

"I only integrate listening and speaking but teach reading and writing each alone because both reading and writing has its own rules"

In contrast, one student (Hawa) said,

Listening and speaking are integrated in our college; [however] some teachers do not even integrate listening and speaking well; we sometimes listen and answer exercises only and then have a presentation, even sometimes the presentation is not about what we listened to..

Another participant (Om Assa'ad) explained that *"one of the listening and speaking courses we studied before was only integrated by name without real implication"*

4.2 Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions of the Segregated-skill Approach

The majority of the students and teachers who participated in this study, to some extent, did not show good attitudes toward the idea of separated-skill classes.

One teacher (P) said, *"skills are interrelated and their separation is boring. In segregated-skill classes, there is poor catch of lesson information"*

One student (Sara) added, *"Usually, we cannot separate the skills from one another. If we study vocabulary, for example, there should be speaking along with it"*

4.3 Perceptions toward the Integration of Listening and Speaking as One Subject

Since the only integrated skills; which are taught as one subject in our college, are listening and speaking, it was essential to investigate the students' and teachers' perceptions of this integration of skills.

Although a minority of the participants appeared to have a negative concept of the word 'integration', all the participants, including that minority, were in accord with the belief that listening and speaking should never be separated. Below are some extracts from the discussions:

"it is difficult to study listening and speaking each alone - both of them together make the context more understandable" (Batroona), *"Very beneficial; by listening first, I get background [of the topic], I get the style, the speaking strategies used, some information... I can then speak confidently"* (Hawa), *"Listening and speaking together means there will be more motivated students and more different and interesting tasks to carry out"* (Elham, a teacher) *"Listening and speaking are couple-like; the best listener is a good speaker and vice versa"* (P, a teacher).

4.4 The Integration of Reading and Writing

Most of the participants agreed with the idea of merging the two skills, reading and writing, together to obtain more beneficial results. An illustration of this,

"when students are given a passage to read and then asked to write something about it, this way will give more emphasis to the new vocabulary used to practise it effectively and never forget it"(Esra & Asma)

In addition, other students highlighted the role that reading plays in affecting one's writing; as one of student said,

"the teacher does her best in explaining the writing strategies [in writing classes] but I need a sample to read first; without that I cannot write"(Hawa)

Also, another student commented,

"as long as you have a good background about the topic that you're asked to write about, you will write about it well- of course, this can be achieved through practising reading first" (Sumaiya)

4.5 Effect of the Integrated-skill Approach on Students' Communicative Competence

Communicative competence as mentioned before is the ability to use language properly. This concept may not be achieved if skills were separated, as one teacher (M2) said,

"if we are going to single out listening from speaking, I don't think the students are going to speak at all! And there will be no competency at all; zero!"

M2 also pointed to the fact she recognized after she taught listening and speaking each alone (as separate subjects) in the previous years before integrating them as one subject,

"I've taught speaking and listening as separate skills for mostly 3 years and I cannot say that this was effective"

Furthermore, the participants' answers regarding the implementation of the integrated approach gave vivid evidence that some integration will be beneficial to develop their level;

One student said, "We have two integrated skills in the Faculty of Education (listening and speaking), as I feel that my level in this course is improving noticeably over time".

Moreover, another student suggested to practise some speaking along with reading and writing, she said

"When I read the reading passage, then I write what I understood from it, and finally talk about what I've written, that surely will improve my level to some extent"

4.6 Challenges Hindering the Implementation of the Integrated-skill Approach

Based on the participating students' and teachers' perceptions, some expected barriers emerged from the discussions seeming to possibly obstruct the good implementation of the approach mentioned above. The following obstacles were highlighted by some of the participants:

- **The time limit:** this was the main excuse that was given by some of the teachers and students when asked if they would recommend integrating reading and writing or even three or the four skills together:

"Integrating them all or even three is difficult because of Time limit" (M1, a teacher).

In addition, Hawa (a student) emphasized that, *"not any teacher can manage the time and gives fair time for each skill when teaching them together"*.

Another student (Al-Asfer) stated that integration takes longer time even before the class, *"As I'm a teacher-to-be, it is easier for me to focus only on one skill in order to prepare my material and teaching aids very well before the class starts; otherwise, they will take longer time"*.

- **Teacher ability and competence:** a number of the students complained that such a modern method needs superior teacher competence and performance, as one of them said, *"I think it requires very experienced teachers who can create a good atmosphere to make such an approach feasible to be applied"* (Hawa).

Another student (Batroona) added, *"some teachers have the ability to teach grammar very effectively but they cannot teach vocabulary or reading with the same quality! Maybe that is due to the different techniques and strategies that each skill requires compared to the others"*

4.7 Language Skills as One Subject: Participants' Views

Language skills are all merged together when used in real life, so many researchers pointed to the importance of practising the language skills together to achieve real communication, as mentioned in the literature review. All students and teachers agreed with the idea that language skills need to be practiced all together.

One student (Esra) said, *"I hope to apply this [language subject] in our collage"*. She continued, *"This will save time so we would graduate early; we will take more time to finish if we study each skill alone"*.

Another participant said, *"the way we study the language skills in our collage is not helpful or useful. So, it would be better to integrate them all in one subject along with the other skills"*

In addition, (M2) agreed strongly with the idea of combining the language skills as one subject. She said, *"I do really agree! All the language skills should really be combined"*.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative research was carried out to provide a description of learners' and teachers' perceptions of the way used for teaching language skills in the Faculty of Education, whether they are integrated or segregated, and to what extent the Integrated-skill Approach may have an impact on the development of learners' communicative competence.

Based on the teachers' and students' experiences of how the English skills are taught in the Faculty of Education, it has been found that the traditional or the segregated way (apart from listening and speaking which are officially merged) is mostly the dominant method used for teaching English language skills and sub-skills in our college.

As the above presented paragraphs indicate, the segregated-skill classes were lacking authenticity, as they were a matter of memorization of vocabulary and some grammar points without any real practices of the language skills. Even though the course title refers to one of the main language skills (especially the Reading Course), the segregated classes end up focusing only on the discrete units of language such as vocabulary and grammar. As Haung (2004) [3] explains, teachers in this kind of class only focus on sub-skills which are reinforced by memorization and drilling.

The findings presented above provided vivid evidence that the only skills that are integrated in the Faculty of Education are listening and speaking; however, the findings showed a clear absence regarding the integration of reading and writing skills. According to their responses, all the participants strongly agreed with the idea of integrating listening and speaking skills. They identified that skills integration can provide multiple benefits; such as the good supply of ideas, more motivation, as well as more interesting tasks. These results could be validated by what Oxford (2001) [7] emphasized that the segregation of skills decreases aspects like motivation, interest and class participation.

In addition, the majority of the participants welcomed the idea of applying the same instruction for teaching reading and writing. They claimed that by integrating reading and writing, learners are more capable to write effectively. They claimed that the reading passages will work as a good model and can provide a background about the topic, the suitable vocabulary, and structures. Consequently, as Reid (1993) [17] highlights, writing tasks give a chance to practise the new words and structures in the reading texts and weakens the chance of totally forgetting them.

Another promising finding which ties well with previous literature is that the integration of the four language skills, or even at least two of them, can affect the learners' communicative competence in a way or another. Most of the students showed that the partly applied integration helped them to study and understand the lesson better than in the separated classes, and pushed them to become more competent to express their ideas and improve their level in other related skills. In contrast, most of the participants' responses regarding the total separation of all the skills were that such a separation can adversely affect the development of the learners' communicative competence. This can be consistent with what was found in Tajzad and Namaghi's study (2014) [8], in which they pointed out that in the Audio-lingual classes learners practised isolated skills, but were not able to communicate their thoughts competently in English.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This paper has mainly aimed to explore the students' and teachers' perceptions of the extent to which the existence and absence of the Integrated-skill Approach can affect the development of the learners' communicative competence. Overall, the results demonstrate that, according to a wide range of participants, there is a strong positive effect of the existence of skills integration in classrooms on the learner's communicative competence. In addition, most of the participants highly criticize the segregated-skill classes for its multiple negative results on the learners' language development. Thus, they recommend integrating all the skills as one subject or even, at least, the skill of reading and writing, as an imitation to the way of integrating listening and speaking.

It could be drawn from the findings that only a minority of the participants hold some negative views about the integration of some skills that they are not accustomed to, and that was justified by different reasons, such as the compulsory curriculum and the current followed traditional teaching styles. However, all the participants, including that minority, welcomed any integration of skills or sub-skills recommended, if done well.

6.2 Recommendations for Further Studies

This paper suggests that teachers should consider the modern teaching techniques of integrating language skills, so that the partial integration already used would be improved, and there might be more demands on the department staff to integrate the other skills. They can arrange many workshops and seminars to make the use of such an approach applicable.

Based on what has been presented previously, future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by taking the followings into consideration:

- As this study was primarily conducted in one setting, further studies could be carried out in other different contexts apart from the Faculty of Education, such as the faculty of Arts and the faculty of languages.
- More methodological work is needed on how the Integrated-skill Approach affects the students' communicative competence by having more participants and using other instruments such classroom observation along with the interviews.
- For future studies, research is needed to apply specifically the integration of reading and writing as one subject and examine the impact of integrating them on the students' communicative competence.

VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The fact that this study focused on one setting and involved a small number of participants, compared to the total number of the students and teachers in the English Department at the Faculty of Education, is considered as a main limitation of the study. This limitation may possibly restrict the representativeness of the sample, which accordingly would affect the generalizability of the research findings.

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