The four basic skill areas/modalities in language learning - speaking, listening, reading and writing, have been increasingly integrated in course offerings, textbooks, and lesson plans since the advent of the Whole Language model and the communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology in the 80’s and 90’s. The Whole Language model brings all language skills to bear on a given topic through blending reading, discussion, meaning negotiation, and articulation and writing. (Bird and Alvarez 1987, Blanton, 1992). In an effort to provide authentic, holistic language experience and practice, the CLT methodology provides authentic experience and practice through a strong emphasis on theme-based contextualization; In her curriculum handbook for teachers, D. Tedick states, “Contextualized teaching recognizes that meaning changes depending upon the context in which it occurs” (2006, p13) and maintains that examples built around grammatical categories do not necessarily reflect communicative functions or create meaning. When we engage with language as the subject (something that acts, something to engage with), rather than merely as an object (something to study), the communicative context becomes more essential and skills integration follows naturally. (Tedick, 2006.) Skills integration, together with language & content integration, is one of the six principles of proficiency-oriented language instruction used in Tedick’s work; the other five being contextualization, authenticity of text and task, process, reflection and interaction. Skill integration is a key factor in contextualized, authentic language learning experiences that help students use the target language successfully outside the classroom.
Multimedia ELT courseware expert L. Knowles (2004) explains how integrating the four skills provides the optimum input environment for language learning. He cites neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, one of the first to hypothesize that learning involves the alteration of neural connections. Hebb’s ideas are often expressed through the phrase, “neurons that fire together wire together”. For language learning, a key element is the synchronized activation of the auditory, phonological, and visual systems in the brain, especially important for listening and reading development. These distinct systems work together with grammatical and conceptual processors to decode sensory input into meaningful language. Have you noticed how often people’s lips move when they read, or how some of us seem to say/hear the words in our mind as we read?

1. **Some teaching situations in which integrating skills enhance language learning:**

**Practicing new material**

When any new material is introduced, learners need effective practice and further engagement to truly “acquire” it. Ideally it will become available for recognition and proper production in all four modalities. Integration of the four skills in practice activities and materials can also avoid monotonous repetition. This integrated exposure helps students realize meanings and various language structures more deeply as well as gain experience in more real applications (Meziani, 1987).

**Preparing Students for Writing Assignments**

According to Knowles (2004), reading and writing neurological processors are relatively slower than listening and speaking ones. It is currently theorized that listening
and speaking fluency can support acquisition of reading and writing skills, but NOT vice versa. This is so in part because the slower but stronger reading processors dominate language processing. As a result, listening processors interrupt the development of automatic decoding mechanisms. On the other hand, if the lesson moves from oral tasks directly to a writing task, too many oral patterns may tend to transfer into the writing. It is best to transition from speaking practice to reading a text (for instance, a text with facts or background for the writing assignment) to activate the written word patterns. Once activated for writing, students then can proceed with the writing practice (Bouzenirh, 1987).

**Addressing learning styles in lesson planning**

When we recycle material through the four skills, we give all learners a chance to encounter it in the mode they can best assimilate. And when we use group work on a project using several forms of input, each student can coach, interpret and model for others in his/her strong modes, while gaining support from others in weak ones. Then through orchestrating their abilities, the students can deliver a satisfying and successful presentation. This diversity allows for valuable group process learning.

**Cultural Learning and Other content-based Instruction**

Investigating cultural perceptions and including cultural material in ESL lessons, according to T.V. Higgs (1984), can build cultural competency, while it adds interest and relevance. Cultural competence is increasingly recognized as integral to language proficiency. Higgs uses authentic visual, textual and audio examples for a more complete exposure. He also integrates the four skills in order to integrate the cognitive and
affective domains around the themes: simulations, role plays, debates, and monologues are alternated with text, movies, and writing tasks in order to verify and clarify impressions and create new discussion. Higgs believes that taking part in the whole communication process develops greater cultural/language proficiency than does merely memorizing and testing discrete facts. This should apply to other content-based areas such as history and science as well.

Assessment

Meziani (1987) and Tedick (2006) believe that assessment in CLT should use the functional, communicative, integrated pattern of this methodology to test proficiency. In practice, students could be required to complete a “performance task” that includes listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. An example might be for a pair of students to interview each other and fill out a simple application. At a higher level, such a task could include choosing a job ad, writing a simple cover letter for application, and making a phone call to ask one question about the job. It is believed that greater validity is attained, as well as greater student benefit during an integrated skills assessment activity.

2. Implications for practice:

- While creating lesson plans, or adapting textbook lessons, ask yourself what other forms of input would or could be present in a real life situation for these students.
- When choosing ways to recycle vocabulary, idioms, lexical phrases, consider how they appear in another modality or how students could place them in another mode authentically.
• Review lesson plans to determine if students with different learning styles will all have good access to the material. You may want to add another modality in which to restate or adapt the new language or structures taught. Two examples: after a discussion, have students compose an e-mail to describe it to a friend; provide sound effects or pictures to illustrate a text and have students write a description of the sounds/pictures they hear/see.

• Compose lesson plans and assessment approaches together in order to have assessment mirror the learning activities and test the proficiencies students developed. That is, avoid putting off your test writing until the night before. Tie it to your teaching from the beginning and adjust for what was actually learned.

References


