

An Integrated-Skills Reading Program for Productive Language Development at the Intermediate Level.

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I. Rationale

Having finished a masteral program in Language Teaching, and now trying to deal with the challenge of teaching English at Chulalongkorn University, I feel that I should, at this point, reflect on what I consider to have been the most effective teaching methodology during my previous years of language instruction, that will hopefully help me to analyze and improve my teaching techniques in lieu of what I have learned about TESL at the University of the Philippines, College of Education. Since the main methodology I have used centers around reading materials, it seems appropriate then to make such an analysis in terms of its applicability for a reading program in a TEFL situation.

During my last two years (1976-1978) of teaching language at the Community School in Tehran, Iran I was able to develop a regular classroom procedure for my second-year students. Eventually I found it to be the most pragmatically effective and personally rewarding teaching experience that I had had during my six years of teaching languages (Spanish, French and English). By the end of the second year about ninety percent of my second-year pupils were able write and speak in a spontaneous, productive, and linguistically competent way concerning most any non-technical topic or situation. And it was mainly our integrative use of interesting and appropriately challenging reading selections which made this possible.

At that time however, I had no theoretical background in applied psycholinguistics, language acquisition and reading development processes. I was purely a trial-and-error teacher. So I want to now briefly outline what I consider my theoretical framework for teaching English at the intermediate level, explain what my past methodology was, and analyze its strengths and weaknesses based on my newly acquired theoretical understanding. Then I shall make suggestions for some significant improvements. In this way I should hopefully have a bag of teaching treats that will be even more effective and rewarding than it proved to be previously.

II. Theoretical Framework

It seems that the audio-lingual, behavioral approach to language, teaching can be effective, in moderation, at the beginning stages of language learning. Once the basic phonological and suprasegmental elements, syntactic structures, and a thousand-word basic vocabulary have been mastered (integrated and activated) then we are ready to begin emphasizing the cognitive code sociolinguistic approaches to language acquisition. When the learner has developed an active, systematic interlanguage into which he can begin rationally testing, integrating, and activating new information, we should then start letting him do just that, as often and systematically as possible. We should as teachers become, at the intermediate level, language advisors and material coordinators rather than mental mechanics *à la* B.P. Skinner. We should begin to concern ourselves with teaching in terms of language functions and situational appropriateness. We should take responsibility for developing activities and implementing curricula which give the learners as much chance as possible to actively use, improve, and expand both their language skill, as well as their lexical, syntactic, and stylistic repertoire. It is a variety of appropriate reading materials that seem, here, to be the most effective springboard for developing a productive language ability in our learners.

Using a reading selection as the springboard, the integrative method that I plan to outline and expand involves using the four language skills every day in class, with enough follow up to usually allow for internalization and activation of most new materials encountered. It likewise is psychologically sound in terms of the kind of student motivation that it allows -- in three different ways. First, the reading selections are ones that are either interesting, fun, or thought-provoking for the students involved. In this sense the selections must be carefully chosen, based on the student's interests, needs, and experiential background. Secondly, the student is taking responsibility for his own efforts and approaches to his assignments so that when he does well he knows that he has himself to thank. Finally, if the method is working as it is meant to, the student's IL growth and creative productive abilities with the language begin improving more and more rapidly, and in an increasingly useful way. In this way the student can actually watch himself progress and feel good about that.

What we are aiming at is a program which allows for a maximum amount of time, in and out of the class, for the student to read, write, speak, and listen in the language being studied. The idea here is that the more exposure the student has to receiving the language (in reading and listening) and the more demands made on him for producing the language (in writing and speaking), then the faster will he expand his interlingual repertoire and abilities -- without each new lexical element and syntactic structure being explained and practiced in an organized way. The program then uses a minimum amount of lexical, grammatical, and comprehension

explanations, exercises, and activities. These activities detract from the time the student has for reading and writing activities and for oral and written paraphrasing. It is the paraphrasing process of this program that I feel is its strongest, but this (as well as some other strengths and weakness) we will point out and try to improve, after we describe how the methodology works on a day to day basis.

III. The Program-Its Procedures

The following is how a teacher would work with the integrated reading program on a day to day basis. Depending on the length of the reading passage, the work centering around the reading selection could be covered from three to five days.

Day 1 is when the passage would be assigned, probably near the end of the period. The teacher should explain briefly what the passage is about, clarify any particularly difficult points that might make the whole passage hard to comprehend, and give some motivating questions and comments about what to look for and why the passage was selected (i.e. the main objective). The students are then assigned to take the reading selection home, read it carefully in both oral and silent forms, make a vocabulary list of the new words with contextual guesses or dictionary definitions for and finally write a 1-4 paragraph **summary** (no copying allowed) depending on the length of the story. This work should be prepared by the next day.

Day 2-3 starts off with a five minute conversation in English, led by the teacher or a student, about anything in particular (a TV program last night, etc.) in order to get the pupil's IL system into action. Then they exchange their written paraphrase assignment with a neighbor to check for spelling, grammar, and comprehension mistakes. This allows the student to review what the passage is about as well as making productive demands on his cognitive linguistic system. Then the teacher begins to have the students take turns reading the passage orally, paragraph by paragraph. After each paragraph ask someone to give a quick oral paraphrase as to what the paragraph was about. If there seems to be some misinterpretation at this point ask anyone else to clarify the misconception. If there continues to be a real conceptual semantic block apparent, this would be the only time during the period that one student should be allowed to quickly explain to those confused, in their native language, what the concept or situation means. All the rest of the period (and in fact the same should hold true every day), should be held only in English (or the language being studied). The native language should be avoided at (almost) all costs, regardless of the frustrations or conceptual difficulties this may incur. The benefits therein of developing fluency will always outweigh any difficulties. The only other aspect of this part of the plan is that the teacher or students should point out any words that are not only new, but also contextually difficult to comprehend, before reading the paragraph in which they are located. Whether we need one or two

days for this stage of the process will depend on the length of the passage. Nevertheless the reading selection should seldom be more than five pages long. The assignment at the end of this stage should be twofold: to prepare for a vocabulary quiz and to hand in the final written resume for a grade. They may want to change some parts of their original resume often what they have learned during this second stage.

Day 3-4 begins with a--5 minute paired (2 students each) conversation using some of the new vocabulary words in a question and answer form. The students also hand in the written resumes. Then the vocabulary quiz should be quickly administered. Most of the rest of the period can be used for two purposes: 1) discussing the reading passage in terms of its interest, feeling, applicability, function, and quality (Keeping the discussion always in English regardless of what limitations that causes) and 2) use some time to work on a particular grammar point which seems at this point appropriate, using exercises and structure drills for practice.

Day 4-5 is the day to hand back the graded quizzes and resumes. The correct answers should not be written by the teacher unless he knows that the student has never been confronted with such a structure or word stage. Instead, the teacher should merely circle mistakes, expecting the student to discover the correct forms and write them himself. Missed vocabulary items should be then written correctly by the individual involved in two original sentences. The graded paraphrase should be rewritten with the necessary corrections -- allowing the student to receive a couple extra points for doing so. Such a form of grading/correcting is not only much less demanding on the teacher's time but it is also more psycholinguistically sound by demanding more of the student's cognitive and linguistic skills. The end of this day should be for presenting and introducing the next reading selection. And the process begins all over again.

IV. The Program - Its Strengths

My previous stated presupposition was that language acquisition, at the intermediate level, occurs most effectively and rapidly when the students are actively involved in employing and expanding their four linguistic skills, everyday, through an organized reading program. So let me here summarize how the four skills are pragmatically developed in the program just described.

Firstly, *reading competence* is developed by both the silent reading at home and the oral recitations in class. Reading for meaning is encouraged in both ways. The fact that the students know they will have to write a resume of the passage means that they will feel obligated to read, skim, contextualize, guess, and dissect where necessary, so that they can come up with an appropriate summary. The oral reading in class helps to reinforce their understanding of the passage by hearing the suprasegmental voice qualities that help illuminate the meaning of the written page.

Writing skills are developed through the written paraphrases and the required correcting and rewriting of their written work. By checking each other's work, as well as their own, the students are being allowed to actively employ their linguistic competence in dealing with new topics, vocabulary, and structures. Furthermore, the paraphrasing activity here really helps them use and expand their cognitive and linguistic capacities in a creative, synthesizing, and productive way each time they confront a new reading selection. If they copy any original sentences or phrases from the selection they are required to start over again until they come up with a non-plagiarized summary. The fact that they have the basic vocabulary and ideas from the passage right in front of them, helps make their task a more reasonable and enjoyable one. I should say here that after a few weeks of frustration and struggle with this process, every student I have ever dealt with is able to produce true summaries -- sometimes with a bit of directed assistance from the teacher for those who really need it.

The *speaking skill* is effectively developed not only by the oral recitation part of the process, but more particularly by the oral paraphrasing that goes on after the reading of each paragraph in class. When the students are able to explain clearly, in their own words, what a passage or paragraph is all about, then they are on their way to developing real linguistic competence. A student, through written and oral paraphrasing, is required to deal with contextual meaning in terms of the discursal, rhetorical relationships involved in the passage -- rather than merely comprehension on a sentence to sentence basis. And, as the program progresses I think one will find that the students become spontaneous and competent in talking not only about a particular reading selection but about an increasing array of other things as well. This is encouraged by spending the first five to ten minutes of each class period to talk about any topic, event, or student interest that seems appropriate on that day -- a free discussion that can be conducted as a group or in pairs. The effectiveness of getting students to talk in pairs (while demanding that they don't use their native language) is that more students get more time to actually use their speaking skills in a comfortable, non-threatening way.

Finally the *listening skills* required for linguistic competence are stimulated and developed each and every day in class. The students are listening to the teacher, to the classroom discussions, to the oral recitations, to the spoken paraphrases, and to themselves even when they are reading silently. What is important here, once again, is that the class sessions be conducted completely in the target language (without any switching if possible) so that the student's oral/aural mental constructs are allowed to remain in the target language. This will clearly help the student's ability to think and function with spontaneity in the target language.

One last practical benefit of this program that I should mention here is that it is a program which, in itself, doesn't demand too much of the teacher's time and effort in preparation on a day to day basis. The necessary lesson plans are fairly simple. In that we teachers have only so much time and energy to devote to our work, I think this is an important point; the consequence here is that the teacher will have more time for correcting written work (of which there is a lot) as well as for tuning into and dealing creatively with, individual students' problems and interests.

V. The program - Its Weaknesses and Some Consequent Recommendations

As we can see, both theoretically and pragmatically, the integrated reading program I am proposing seems reasonably sound. And, as I have said, it certainly was a program that worked well for me during the two years that I employed it. With the linguistic background that I have now obtained I can see, in terms of psycholinguistics and applied linguistics, why the program did work in many ways. That is what is implied in the strengths of the program that I outlined in the last section. But it certainly was not a perfect program in many ways. I was surely not able to help every student help himself develop a useful, enjoyable, and effective level of linguistic competence (let alone communicative competence) as well as I might have.

I would therefore like to enumerate what I now consider to be some of the major weaknesses of the program and, therein, illuminate some suggestions for improvement. Firstly the program, as I employed it, involved no organized plan for systematically developing the syntactic competence of the students. Grammar improvement occurred through the osmosis and integration of new structures that resulted merely from constant reading and writing activities. But if we can be intentional about locating some repeated structures in the passage that exemplify a point that needs to be taught or reviewed, and make some drills and exercises which work with that particular structure, then we should be helping our learners to further strengthen their syntactic competence, as long as it's not overdone. To decide what structures or interlingual interferences need to be dealt with, we should take a dual approach -- one individually oriented and the other group oriented. For the group we should keep an inventory of the kinds of mistakes that are being made by a majority of the class. We could then set aside some time, let's say once every two weeks, to work on these particular problems. For individual problems we should require each student to keep a list of his own mistakes that have resulted from his written resumes. Follow up on this would then require a regular time slot and procedural system wherein the students could work on overcoming their repetitive type errors through study, drills, and the writing of sentences (using the structures involved) in an appropriate way.

Another weakness seems to be that there aren't enough opportunities for creative expression, in reading and writing rather than mere resumes of the required selection. A couple of ideas for dealing with this problem come to mind. If the reading selection is a fantasy or adventure type story that stimulates the imagination, then we could present only part of the story to the students at first and ask them to complete the story in the most interesting and imaginatively appropriate way possible. If the passage involves a particular style that is new and/or seems a useful style to integrate into the student's writing abilities, then we should work out some writing exercises that involve style imitation. If the passage deals with a moral question, socio-cultural conflict, on politico-economic problem, then we can get the students to work on a position paper or classroom debate dealing with the particular subject.

There seem to be some other possibilities for creative oral activities as well. After the selection has been read, comprehended, and summarized, then we should work out some appropriate discussion questions that will stimulate interpersonal and group conversations. Such discussions will work better when the passage deals with a real-life problem or possibility that the students can personally relate to. In this sense we must be sensitive about what selections we choose to read, not only for their linguistic but also referential content. One procedural suggestion, for effectively handling discussions, would be to break the class into small groups, of three to five members, in order to discuss and consense on their ideas. Then one member of each group could be asked to report orally, to the whole class, as to the findings and feelings expressed by his group. This method will help give more people more chance to get involved in speaking in a motivating and non-threatening way.

Another possible problem of the program, if not handled correctly, is that it can become tedious to the students. In this sense it is important that we vary the reading materials as much as possible, while still maintaining their linguistic and referential appropriateness for the group. A combination of mystery, fantasy, and real-life drama stories, together with some articles on formal and academic subjects, as well as materials taken from journalistic publications, this would seem to allow for the kind of variety that could delimit any tediousness. A variety of materials can be used not merely to increase the interest factor however. It can also be used to help students learn about a number of different areas of human knowledge in a number of ways. Likewise it can be used to activate an awareness of stylistic and sociolinguistic factors which affect literature and determine meaning. Here is where we can help our students learn to be linguistically analytical and sensitive to the communicative factors of role, setting, status, function, formality level, topic, mood, etc.

This implies one final weakness of the original program that I would like to mention. That is the lack of approaches and techniques for helping to develop communicative competence in the pupils. Two years ago I had never even heard the term "communicative competence" let alone knew what it meant. Now that I do have a good feeling for the concept and its implications for teaching, I still believe that our primary concern at the intermediate level needs to be the development of a solid, functioning, spontaneous level of a linguistic competence. But sociocultural appropriateness can never be completely disregarded if we are teaching language for communication purposes. Therefore the matter of teaching and working with the language factors of speech functions, styles, and situations should be a part of our approach in working with the various reading selections we present. We can aim regularly at helping our students to analyze their work in terms of the extralinguistic factors involved (setting, participants, topic, mood, presuppositions, etc.) in order to better understand how meaning is determined by these factors. One particular technique for practicing this knowledge and improving communicative competence would be to change one or more of the extralinguistic variables of the passage in order to analyze or experience how such changes would affect the entire sense and/or feeling of the passage.

VI. Conclusion

With more time, effort, and ingenuity I am sure that other creative suggestions could be made. Nevertheless, the program seems to hold a lot of promise both in terms of its linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological soundness. Linguistically it is based on a pragmatic combination of cognitive code and sociolinguistic approaches to language teaching/learning. Pedagogically, it is based on a dynamic interrelationship between student-centered and teacher-organized curriculum. Psychologically, it centers on the more contemporary notions of educational psychology concerning motivation and cognitive processes, as well as the newer ideas in psycholinguistics. These concern the reading, writing, speaking, and listening processes that can best develop when the activities involved are integrated, meaningful, enjoyable, and demanding of active participation.

So, through a variety of appropriate reading selections as the basis for a variety of creative, participatory language activities which are integrated and systematized, I feel that we have one possible reading program that will work well for both teacher and student alike -- a program that will be rewarding and effective for all involved. As a final summary, let me present what I consider to be the schematic design of the proposed reading program so that we might more clearly see why it can be a worthwhile methodology, dependent on the effectiveness of the teacher and the size of the classroom.

