## TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS

Throughout this chapter, we will attempt to analyse the four language skills as already divided by pedagogues: listening, speaking, reading and writing. We will, first, describe their stages of development and levels of activities, their teaching steps and ways of assessment . We will , then , discuss how the four skills are combined into integrated language skills for the learner to perform various activities of information processing ,retrieval and transfer, and help him develop a certain proficiency in manipulating the language.

**Part one**

**I. The Listening Skill**

**1.Stages of development and levels of activities**

-At a first stage, listening is a matter of detection of rise and fall of the language most frequent sounds. Anyone listening to a foreign language for the first time would not understand a word of what is being said , but he would rather recognise meaningless sounds that are most prominent in that language.

-At a second stage, the listener would start detecting some familiar elements without being able to recognise the interrelationship within the whole stream of sounds.

-At a third stage there is a conscious recognition of the crucial elements , because of repetition, but without retention in long term memory.. This means that the listener recognises the essential elements of the language but he is not able to remember what he has recognised.

At this level, all his attention is taken up by recognition and , thus, he is unable to concentrate his attention on the language elements, long enough, because of the high rate of information in sound sequences with which he is not familiar. At this level the short term memory is in process.

-At stage four, there is a recognition of elements with retention. When the learner is more familiar with the foreign language, and the long term memory has stored enough information, he recognises the elements and understands heir relationship. Understanding is the basis of retention; one cannot retain an information unless he understands it.

It is, thus, obvious that short term memory helps recognition while long term memory helps understanding and retention. On the basis of these two aspects, the levels of activities can be described.

The first level of activity , of the listening skill, is recognition which is basically the identification of the sounds, the words and phrases in t heir structural interrelationship , the time sequences and modifiers , and those redundant phrases which add nothing to the line of thought

The second level of activity is selection when the listener draws out from what he hears those elements which seem to express the purpose of the speaker or those which suit the listener's purpose.

**2. Teaching listening comprehension**

**2.1. Teaching objectives**:

The objectives of teaching listening comprehension can be geared towards the already established stages of development and levels of activities. We can , thus, distinguish two main objectives:

- to recognise without effort the sound patterns (sound discrimination affecting meaning) , intonation patterns, stress and word grouping , and to recognise grammatical sequences, modifiers, and hesitation expressions (which can be ignored as irrelevant to the message);

- to select the level of discourse (formal/informal), emotional overtones (excited, disappointed, angry,...), and regional, social and dialectal variations.

It is obvious, from this distinction, that the first objective aims at developing linguistic competence while the second one aims at developing communicative competence.

**2.2.Teaching Steps**

Broadly speaking, in the early stages, there is a concentration on recognition and in later stages, on deduction of meaning and selection. We will, thus, follow a procedure of four corresponding to the four stages of development of this skill.

-Step 1: identification of sounds where the common practice is repetition of individual words, short sentences or short sentences interrelated in a dialogue.

-Step 2: identification without retention where the learner listens to a conversation between two or three speakers who discuss a subject of interest to the learner, with no questions to be answered.

-Step 3: identification with short term retention where the learner listens to a dialogue ( from a tape ) with some prior indication of what he is to listen for ; i.e: he is given questions beforehand.

-Step 4: identification with long term retention where the learner listens to all kinds of materials ( literary texts , poems , etc . . . ) and discusses the intention of the speaker. In this activity, he practises listening to regional accents and to all types of voices, and can discuss any aspect of the text.

In addition to these steps , there are some general recommendations that one has to take into account;

-All materials used for teaching of listening comprehension should be authentic (consisting of utterances with a high probability of normal use by native speakers) because teaching a learner to comprehend artificial language combinations is a waste of time and energy and can only confuse him when he is later confronted with natural speech.

-All utterances should be delivered at normal speed from the earliest lessons. Normal speed does not mean rapid speed, but a speed of delivery which would not appear to a native speaker as being artificial, a speed which retains normal word groupings and natural intonation.

**3. Assessment of the listening skill**

All the exercises and types of tests discussed here can be used both for teaching and testing the listening skill.

-Test 1: at very early stages, the teacher can show a picture or an object and then would give three different comments about it. The learner would then mark a, b, c or 1,2,3 to show which one he considers to be the most appropriate.

-Test 2: at a more advanced stage, when the learner has acquired some facility in reading the foreign language, he would listen to dialogues, narratives, descriptions, etc... and answer multiple choice questions (M.C.Q).

-Test 3: a learner would listen to longer stretches of speech and fill in the blanks.

-Test 4: a learner would answer questions after listening to a text. This type of test raises a lot of objections.

As the learner answers in writing, as a response to printed questions, he may understand what he hears but misinterprets the printed question (so , here, there is a problem of reading) . He may also understand both the text and the question but does not answer correctly, accurately, in writing.

In these two cases, the learner does not get credit if he understands the message but misinterprets the question or expresses himself so awkwardly in writing that his answer does not reflect his understanding.

These are the limitations of such a test, which can be reduced to a minimum if more weight is given to evidence of listening comprehension via clear , easy, questions and not too much stress on the written side.

-Test 5: paraphrasing what the speakers say according to some guided questions.

-Test 6: summarising

**4. Conclusion**

Fluent listening results only from wide exposure to the foreign language and much practice in seeking specific points of information from spoken sources. It can and should be taught from the beginning of foreign language teaching/learning.

**II-The Speaking Skill**

**1. Stages of development and levels of activities**

The act of speech involves the selection of integrated patterns of elements for the expression of an intention and the assembling of the necessary linguistic features. This means that there is a selection of the message to send and the encoding of that message to be transmitted.

This process requires two levels of activities:

-the use of the linguistic forms of the language , and ;

-the knowledge of when, how, and to whom it is appropriate to use these forms.

These two levels are not used separately, but rather combined in such an accurate way to express coherently a certain message , according to a given context.

**2.Teaching the speaking skill**

**2.1.Teaching objectives:**

In teaching the speaking skill, the learner is expected to:

-manipulate the elements of language ( lexical items, syntactic patterns, and sentence types orally ) and ;

-select when, how, and to whom it is appropriate to use these elements ( the style of the language in which he is going to express himself, the register, the level of discourse, and the emotional overtones).

**2.2.Teaching steps**

There are , generally , two main steps in teaching the speaking skill. The first one is concerned with the manipulation of the language and the second one is concerned with the selection of appropriate language

-Step 1: at early stages, there is a frequent use of language drills that include mere repetition of single sounds, words, and sentences in a very stereotypic way in order to develop good pronunciation and mastery of language structure, in addition to a lot of oral substitution drills to provide the learner with a repertoire of lexicon and sentence structure.

It is , however, recommended not to use any support of written texts if the learner is to become confident in oral manipulation. Nevertheless, this remains an ideal matter because , in learning a foreign language, the final achievement will always be that of a foreign speaker.

-Step 2: at advanced stages, there is a focus on the selection of appropriate language for an appropriate context.

At this level, teachers should develop a lot of activities where the learner has to get the meaning across by manipulating properly the elements of language expressing his intention in a socially acceptable way ( not merely repeating what he hears, like at early levels).

Hence, at this level, a lot of opinion gap, reasoning gap, problem solving, and information transfer activities are practised by the learner. For example:

Activity 1:social formula like greetings, introductions, partings, excuses, compliments, complaints, etc....

Activity 2: community oriented situations: at the bank, at the post-office, at the hotel, etc....

Activity 3: role play where the learner is assigned a fictitious role from which he has to improvise some kind of behaviour towards the other role characters in the activity.

**3. Assessment of the speaking skill**

3.1. The oral test:

In this test , the learner is placed in a situation where he has to talk about a topic either chosen by the teacher or by himself. The mark allocated , in this test, must take into account:

-the ability to comprehend the spoken language ( the question), the interaction with the one who conducts the test;

-the ability to frame a response: the ideas and the organisation of ideas;

-the ability to express the ideas intelligibly, with correct structure, appropriate lexical items and, to a certain extent, acceptable articulation of sounds, stress, intonation and juncture (co-articulation of word groupings); and

-the ability to express one's ideas fluently.

This test is considered unreliable because the mark allocated varies from one scorer to another due to different focus on the different aspects covered by the mark. Moreover, as very little time is available for deciding on the mark, we arrive at some subjective counterbalance of the various elements, so it is not always clear whether all the elements are given credit.

In order to achieve more objectivity, the test can be recorded and listened to later so that more time is given to the evaluation of the learner's performance.

Another way of achieving more objectivity would be to prepare a grid ( a table) with the different aspects to be evaluated and the percentage of the score allocated to each aspect. At the end of the test, the scorer adds the sub-scores to get the final score. This can be done by several teachers ( a jury ).

3.2. Sub-tests:

Many sub-tests of pronunciation, stress, intonation,-etc... can be organised to evaluate the different aspects of speech separately.

3.3.Classwork:

This consists of keeping a regular record of learners' production in class. This type of evaluation gives a fairer picture of the learners' capacities but it is very time-consuming.

**4.Conclusion**

Speaking a foreign language is manipulating its linguistic forms in the right social environment for communication purposes. It should be focused on this way, both in teaching and in evaluation.

**III. The reading skill**

**1.Stages of development and levels of activities**

They consist of two major stages and levels; one concerns decoding the linguistic aspects of language, the other concerns anticipation and prediction of communication outcomes.

1.1.Decoding: This linguistic ability includes the following levels:

-decoding grapho-phonic information of the sound-symbol relationship;

-decoding syntactic information derived from structure as expressed in word order, prefixes, suffixes, question/statement, noun/verb, tenses, sentences, or parts of sentences...

-decoding semantic information from the content of words;

-decoding socio-cultural information from the connotations specific to a given culture.

1.2.Anticipation:

It is the ability to predict what will probably follow while holding in one's immediate memory elements of what precedes. This cognitive ability combines general background knowledge with intellectual ability of anticipation , prediction, and problem solving. The reader usually draws from what he already knows, as already established experience, to set probabilities of new experience and acquiring new things. Furthermore, the reader holds in short term memory instant facts and language elements which help him set ground for possible hypothetical solutions, results, denouement or conclusions about what he is reading.

**2.Teaching reading comprehension**

**2.1.Teaching objectives**

In reading comprehension, the learner is supposed to be able to:

- identify major ideas , sub-points , and supporting details;

-recognise the rhetorical devices that typically go with different types of development of ideas in writing ( chronological, spatial, etc...);

-recognise structural patterns typical of specific types of writing.

These are general objectives that can be better specified in terms of text type , category of the task and level of the learners.

**2.2.Teaching steps**

Step 1: at this level, the learner is made familiar with the conventional representation of the phonemes of the foreign language in a graphic form; the sound-symbol relationship. For example:

Activity 1: reading drills followed by an explanation of the relationship of specific sound/spelling combinations;

Activity 2: exercises with the various spellings encountered for a particular sound.

Step 2: the learner is taught to read in word groupings. He is trained to look ahead and recognise sections of thought as they develop. For example:

Activity 1: the teacher reads to give the model ( to avoid mistakes ) and then the learner reads silently afterwards. There follows some practice of deduction of meaning from context through some specific questions.

Activity 2: the teacher reads first, and then the learner reads with a reference to an outline of the text in order to help him anticipate what probably follows.

Step 3: the learner practises quick recognition of structural clues like tenses, types of sentences: statement/question, exclamation, negation; sentence structures: simple, compound, complex sentences ; modifiers: adjectives, adverbs, nouns used as adjectives; and the recognition of rhetorical organisation like relationships of time, cause and effect, organisation between ideas, etc....The main activity in this teaching step is reading comprehension followed by a discussion , an explanation, or an exemplification of the elements in question.

Step 4: at this level, there is emphasis on the extension of areas of vocabulary where the main activity is reading comprehension followed by a discussion of the meaning of unfamiliar words. Here, the learner is encouraged to make intelligent guesses deducing the meaning of these words from context.

Step 5: now, the learner is able to read and understand what he reads and the main activity would be reading comprehension followed by a discussion of any aspect of the text with personal analysis and opinion.

Step 6: prospectively, here, the learner is confident enough to pick up a book, a magazine or a newspaper and read it for his own pleasure and enlightenment, with occasional resort to a dictionary.

**2.3.The text**

The most important aspect of teaching reading comprehension is the selection of the reading comprehension text. It is recommended that the text used as a basis for the reading activity does not contain marked dialect or slang or old fashioned language use.

It is usually believed that it is easier to read what is interesting and ideologically compatible, at least at early stages. So the text should be interesting to the learner and should not contrast with his cultural values ( this is not to be taken to an extreme point though ).

**3.Assessment of reading comprehension**

There are generally two types of tests administered to assess reading comprehension.

Test 1: the questions about the text can be of five types:

1-the information required is contained in the question. Yes/No, True/False, Multiple Choice Questions, and Matching-items

2-the information required is quoted directly from the text. Who, When, Where, What questions.

3-the information required is derived from the text but not directly quoted. Why/How questions.

4- the information required is an inference ( implication ) from the text ( it is not stated explicitly in the text).

5-the answer requires an evaluation relating the text to personal experience or to any other information.

Test 2: the cloze procedure (CZ) , or filling in the blanks, is a test which is administered to evaluate the learner's ability to predict what probably follows in a text and select pragmatically the appropriate word for a given context. The text is approximately 25O words long where there is no deletion of words in the first and last sentences. However, there is usually a deletion of every 7th word which is replaced by a standard blank to avoid giving a clue to the right word.

The learner is supposed to find the exact word or any other acceptable word.

**IV. The Writing Skill**

**1.Stages of development and levels of activities**

Writing is the act of putting down in conventional graphic forms something which is spoken ( sounds and letters ) and the combinations of letters which convey meaning ( words ). It is also the expression of ideas in a consecutive way according to the conventions of the language ( sentences and paragraphs ).

It is, hence, obvious that the first level of activity would be that of spelling and spelling combinations. The second level would be that of structural combinations and conventional presentation. The third level is concerned with rhetorical conventions of pragmatic language use for specific purposes where the learner writes to a specific person, for a specific communicative goal.

**2.Teaching writing:**

**2.1.Teaching objectives**

The learners is expected to be able to:

-handle the graphic system of the language ( the alphabet ) and the spelling according to the conventions of the language;

-control the structure of the language so that what he writes is comprehensible to the reader;

-select from possible combinations of words those that convey the ideas he has in his mind, in the register most appropriate to the situation.

**2.2.Teaching steps**

Step 1: the main activity is copying which is the exact reproduction of the letters according to a model. It is an introduction to the alphabetic system of the language.

Step 2: the main activity is rewriting the words, and the sentences already copied without reference to the original copy or to the learner's copy. The learner practises memorisation exercises of the code.

Step 3: here, the activities are about reproduction with minor adaptations. For example:

Activity 1: substitution, where the learner is required to substitute (replace) certain words by others maintaining the same structure as the model; substitution can be of the tense, gender, number, etc...

Activity 2: transformation from one sentence type to another;

-from the active to the passive voice and vice versa;

-from positive to negative form and vice versa;

-from statement to question and vice versa;

-from direct to indirect speech and vice versa.

Step 4: reproduction with major adaptations ( modification) where the learner relies much less on the model and tries to add up his knowledge of the language conventions to combine and produce more or less complex forms. For example:

Activity 1: expansion of a sentence ( made longer ) with the addition of words;

Activity 2: integration of two or more sentences together, linked with a junction or a relative pronoun to make a longer sentence;

Activity 3: reduction of two sentences to only one sentence, with the omission of certain words. This is also called embedding whereby the information is packed in one sentence instead of two.

Step 5: guided writing where the learner is required to write a paragraph following an outline , or specific questions , paraphrase or summarise a text.

In this activity, the framework is given but there is some freedom in the selection of words and structures.

Step 6: free writing of composition/essay where the learner is free to use his own words and structures for the expression of a personal message.

**3.Assessment of writing**

The type of the test is generally determined by the level of the learners and the acquired knowledge of language.

Test 1: this consists of a certain number of sub-tests which cover aspects of language spelling, lexicon and structure, each dealt with separately; substitution, transformation, expansion, integration, or reduction. These sub-tests are usually administered at early levels.

Test 2: writing a composition/essay; at early levels the teacher corrects only the patterns covered in class using a red pen and use a blue pen for patterns not yet covered. The mark allocated to this type of test should cover a certain percentage of the information required ( ideas ) , organisation of ideas, grammatical accuracy, lexical accuracy, and general idiomaticity ( authenticity ).

**Part Two**

While teaching, the four language skills can not be dealt with in the way mentioned above, unless there is a special focus on a particular skill. Even though, in the teaching of any particular skill there is always an integration of one or all the other language skills. In this way one has to consider how language skills can be combined, integrated , in one language course . It seems, thus , that this integration becomes a necessity as any language skill can be either the vehicle or the outcome of another skill.

The traditional integration used to focus on the stimulus-response relationship between the language skills. The only possible integration used to be the conditioning of speech behaviour through listening and repeating and the writing behaviour through reading, copying and reproducing. Though this integration seems to be somehow necessary at early levels , it focuses too much on listening and speaking and ignores the development of reading and writing which are always delayed to later stages.

We will, then, examine what characteristic features of similarity and difference in nature, communicative procedures and use of all the language skills in order to establish a model of communication most appropriate to foreign language teaching and learning.

**I-nature of integration**

If we examine the stages of development and levels of activities of all the language skills , we will see that there are some features of similarities and difference between listening and reading on one hand , and between speaking and writing on the other hand .

In listening and reading , the first stages and levels are about identification and recognition of the code ; in listening the learner identifies and recognises the phonic code from which he would , in further stages and levels, interpret and understand meaning from a sender ( a speaker ). In reading, the learner uses almost the same stages as for identifying and recognising the graphic code of the language from which he would later on develop the ability of interpreting the message of the writer and set probabilities of further development in the line of thought .

At the next stages and levels, the learner develops in both language skills the ability to focus on important elements of the message and ignore redundancy. He would , at advanced stages, develop the ability to understand the purpose of the speaker/writer, select what type of elements suit his own purpose, and interpret the speech or the text according to context

However, we can notice that the main difference between listening and reading is in the nature of the code -channel- itself. In listening the phonic code is instant , fast, sometimes non-formal - colloquial, slang, dialect, etc...-, and difficult to remember. In reading, the graphic code is more everlasting , slow, and almost always formal. If the learner wants to re-read, he always gets the possibility of coming back to the code while if he wants to re-listen , he does not have the same possibility as the flow of speech and the rate of information coming in do not allow enough time for stopping and reviewing what has been listened to.

In speaking and writing, the similarities are about the learners' abilities to handle and manipulate the code appropriately to express a message, an intention. There is , at first, an assembling of the message and, then, an encoding of the message into language. At advanced stages, the learner would select the level of discourse and the most appropriate , accurate, way of addressing the message according to social, cultural and personal context.

The main differences between these two language skills are about the code itself and time of delivery. In speech, the code is phonic , instant and informal, to some extent. In writing, the code is graphic, time consuming and formal.

II-Procedural integration

Communicative procedures adopt a model of information coming in and out. On this basis, we believe the learner processes an input and produces an output. As learning a foreign language requires the exposure of the learner to instances of language use, both listening and reading are necessary to get in knowledge of language, and knowledge in general, as an input. However language and information output is an outcome of information processing to show the learners abilities of getting that information through -communication across- to other people.

Language processing, then, comes into action when the learner is required to make use of that input in order to understand and retain the information, and when he is required to make use of an output to express an idea, an opinion, or a solution to a problem.

Communicative language processing activities rely most of the time on the learner's listening and/or reading to practise an exercise of information retrieval and/or transfer . For example, the learner listens to a dialogue between two friends ,discussing a given topic, and fill in a chart showing the points of agreement and disagreement between the interlocutors. The learner may also read a text and transfer what he reads into a mathematical ,geographic, representation of the information as in a weather forecast , for example.

Problem solving activities, which do not require an immediate language output, also rely on listening and reading to present the problem to the learner. For example , Multiple Choice Questions and Matching-items rely mainly on learner's abilities in decoding -reading- the written message , while note-taking relies on learner's abilities in decoding -listening to- the spoken message.

Language and information output are results, outcomes , of information processing and a necessity for communication purposes. They are prominent in speaking and writing where the learner is required to communicate an idea, a message, or an opinion .

At early stages and beginners' level, the output is a result of language response to a particular stimulus, like activities of repetition ( in speaking ) and copying ( in writing ). At intermediate stages, the learner adds up his background knowledge of language and the world to transmit /transform a certain message. Hence, at advanced stages and levels, the learner can communicate his own ideas freely in speech and writing.

At early stages and levels, the main activities are those that rely on common channel of communication. From the aural-oral channel, the learner listens to the language as an input and attempts to modify and adopt his speech behaviour progressively from repetition to transformation and modification.

From the written channel, the learner deciphers, reads, the language as an input and then attempts to improve his writing abilities progressively from copying to transformation and modification.

At advanced stages, intermediate, post intermediate and advanced levels information transfer is the most appropriate example of language skills integration. The learner would get the information, the input, from various non-linguistic or semi linguistic data ( tables, charts, diagrams, maps, pictures, etc...) and transfer that information into a linguistic code -either in speech or in writing.

We can conclude that language skills integration is not based on the order of language acquisition and the structural /behaviourist trends which advocate the priority of speech over writing, though this is necessary at early stages. Language skills integration is based on information and communication theories which give priority to input processing , understanding , and communicating the output. This leads us to ask the question whether the learner is learning the foreign language or learning to learn and develop strategies of information processing.

**III-Integration outcome and study skills**

The integration of language skills, though complex in theory, serves the design of learning tasks and the development of learning strategies. Whatever the quality and nature of input , the learner is not just a pot teachers fill in with knowledge. He needs to process, understand, the input in order to store the information in his mind.

From this orientation one can say that learning strategies, as described by cognitive and psycholinguistic models, guide the course designer in developing a course and tasks which help the learners acquire some study skills.

The most commonly described strategies are the top-down and bottom-up models. The top-down model assumes that when we learn, we base all our understanding on previously acquired knowledge -schema or schemata- which serve as a framework of reference for the processing of new information. Hence, the learner moves from general, wide frames of reference -the top- down to the details of the new information. In language learning this means that the learner is exposed to whole chunks of language use from which he derives the specific characteristics of the language gradually , moving from general understanding to specific details of the message and of language.

The bottom-up model assumes that when we learn, we base all our understanding on the accumulation of knowledge items gradually under categories or types of layers building up a pyramid from the bottom up to reach a complete knowledge of language. Hence the learner is exposed to items of language , under their typical categories of script, grammar, pronunciation, lexicon, etc... moving from the accumulation of these specific items of knowledge and of language towards general linguistic competence.

It is obvious, from these two models , that the top-down strategies are applied by communicative methodology and that the bottom-up strategies are applied by structural/behaviourist methodology. Some psycholinguists and psychopedagogues reject this dichotomy and advocate the ability and the reality of learning procedures and strategies being a combination of both models and strategies; the top-down and the bottom-up.

The actual results, outcomes, of language skills integration are those study skills applied in classroom activities and tasks . All the study skills are combinations of language skills in terms of input processing and output production. For example:

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| language skills integration Study skills outcome |
| listening and speaking : -listen and repeat; |
| -listen and transform, modify; |
| -listen and answer questions; |
| -listen and comment, argue, paraphrase, |
| summarise, etc... |
| -discussions: class, groups |
|  |
| listening and writing: -dictation; |
| -note-taking; |
| -filling in a diagram, chart, etc... |
| reading and speaking -reading aloud; |
| -reading ,speaking and acting: |
| (dialogues and role-play) |
| -reading; answering questions orally |
| reading and writing : -reading and filling in the blanks |
| -reading and answering questions |
| paraphrasing, summarising |
| -reading and filling in a diagram, a |
| chart, a table, etc... |

This is not an exhaustive list of study skills. Further combinations can be made according to some specific materials and objectives of learning, especially in the field of teaching for Specific Purposes.

However, we can add that, for some language skills, some special techniques are already established as for example in :-listening and reading: pausing and word grouping, skimming, scanning, intensive and extensive listening and reading comprehension.-writing; paragraph development, punctuation, composition and essay, etc...-speaking: expressing personal opinions, addressing an audience, chattering, story-telling ( relating ) turn-taking, etc...