

# Language skills: questions for teaching and learning

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*This paper surveys some of the changes in teaching the four language skills in the past 15 years. It focuses on two main changes for each skill: understanding spoken language and willingness to communicate for speaking; product, process, and genre approaches and a focus on feedback for writing; extensive reading and literature for reading; and decoding and metacognitive awareness for listening. This overview, however, suggests that changes in theoretical understandings and in teacher training often do not filter down to the classroom and that change is context dependent to a very high degree. Overall, some of the changes that have been at work in language teaching since the 1970s may not have reached classrooms in compulsory education around the world.*

## Introduction

Summarizing a decade and a half of change in the language classroom is difficult enough, but additional factors make this enterprise even more problematic. Some of these are discussed in the concluding sections of this paper, but one issue which needs to be laid out in the open at the very beginning is the **continuing, paradoxical separation of language skills**. This separation contrasts with our understanding of language use as entailing a relationship between at least two skills (and often more), with our understanding of the importance of context in all language use, and with current views of literacy and oracy. However, from a pedagogical point of view, there are arguments for focusing on skills in isolation at least some of the time.

The four main sections of this paper therefore focus on each skill in turn and describe two important developments or current characteristics for each. I then attempt to draw these points together to provide an overview of the changes and the way they link to the ELT landscape at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

## Teaching speaking Understanding spoken language

The most obvious changes in this area have been in our view of what teaching speaking entails. This involves issues as varied as the connection between teaching speaking and teaching pronunciation, teaching aspects of conversation, teaching long turns, issues of teaching spoken grammar, and the increasing pedagogical implementation of previous understandings of conversation and pragmatics. The most

important changes have resulted from a focus on naturalistic language data, leading to an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon of spoken language. Technological advances have made it possible for some time to construct large corpora of spoken language, and what is now known as the Nottingham School, building on such corpora, has demonstrated what are seen as major differences between spoken and written English. As a result, something of a divide has developed between scholars who focus on the common core of spoken and written language and those scholars who go as far as claiming that the differences between spoken English and Standard English are so large that we should not consider Standard English as a spoken dialect but only as a written one (see Mauranen 2006 for a clear overview of the divisions in this field). In the middle are those who acknowledge that there are differences between spoken and written English but doubt the significance of these differences for language teachers and learners (in spite of acknowledging the lure of what some coursebooks call 'real' English). Many scholars stress that any implications of these differences are likely to be relevant only to upper-intermediate and advanced learners (though Hughes 2010 suggests that materials based on these insights can, in fact, be adjusted to lower levels).

In all of these areas, a productive and provocative area of research has been comparing corpus data and the representation of spoken language in coursebooks and classrooms. Many studies focus on elements that are missing and are not taught; for example how complaints are presented, teaching learners to mitigate requests, the pedagogical presentation of reported speech compared with its occurrence in language corpora, or the use of vague language (see Wong and Waring 2010 for good coverage of many of these topics). All of these studies also contribute important insights to the debate about the meaning and role of authenticity in the language classroom.

The result of this increasingly nuanced understanding of speaking, speech acts, and speech events, as well as the differentiation between different types of talk, is that there is now much more to teach. Indeed, Hughes (op.cit.: 209) points out that 'materials for teaching speaking need to synthesize what can be extracted from this immense variety of spoken discourse types and contexts to form the basis of something that can manageably be presented, taught, and assessed'. In addition, longitudinal studies are making us increasingly aware of other difficulties in implementing these findings: we now realize how long it takes for learners, even those immersed in the language, not just to incorporate specific elements of socio-pragmatic competence into their linguistic behaviour, but even to just develop *some* awareness of these phenomena.

Hughes goes on to suggest that the complexities of the skill itself mean that 'materials should generally, and perhaps paradoxically, not be too ambitious in their aims' (op.cit.: 210). She singles out two areas that need to be focused on: firstly, an awareness of the differences between written and spoken language; and secondly, strong language production skills. (Interestingly, this last point includes areas that impinge on areas

such as voice projection, confidence, gesture, and gaze, all of which can be seen as part of identity work, an important new element that has emerged in the past ten years in L2 research.)

The points above have important implications for thinking about classroom methodology. One is the way in which they refocus attention on what native speakers say and the way they interact. The ‘Real English’ corners in coursebooks are particularly problematic because they often highlight areas of language that are highly susceptible to change, as well as highlighting localized varieties; this raises important concerns with the definition of ‘native speaker’ and issues with the lingua franca use of English. A second issue is that some of the basic, and consistently valuable, principles used to generate classroom communication—information gap or opinion gap, to take the most basic ones—seem to be left by the wayside. Learners are asked to express other people’s meanings and their conversations are managed by others; if the learner is instructed to interrupt, what does this do to the authenticity of classroom conversation? And what if learners know how to interrupt but cannot generate appropriate content that will justify the interruption? Some recent coursebooks, rather than focusing on real communication within the classroom, seem to home in much more on the structural elements of conversations and the discursal exponents expressing them. Real communication—learners expressing their own meanings in words that they themselves have chosen—is sometimes thrown out, and in some extreme cases, the learners seem to be on a rollercoaster of functions and discourse markers.

Willingness to communicate and reticence

A second focal point re-emerging recently is the challenge of getting learners to interact. As Hughes (op.cit.) points out, speaking is a high-risk activity which can never be retracted or erased, making some learners worry about speaking and losing face. Increasing learner speaking time is therefore bound up with understanding both learner and teacher contributions to the quantity and quality of classroom interactions. Two strands are present here, one focusing on the teacher and their role in encouraging learners to speak, the other looking at reasons that learners themselves provide for their reticence. Unfortunately, however, the picture that emerges is one where the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) sequence of interaction still dominates in the classroom. We are becoming increasingly aware that learners are often socialized into this pattern of response, and their expectations are that this is how language classrooms will be conducted. Since many teachers will also have been taught in classrooms where this was the norm, the cycle may be extremely difficult to break. Wong and Waring (op.cit.) invite teachers to reflect on the use of IRF sequences and getting away from them, including what they call ‘identity shift’ (see also my comment on identity above). Interestingly, they also suggest that in the language classroom, some of the most authentic interchanges might be found in what could be considered off-task exchanges.

## Teaching writing Product, process, and genre

In the teaching of writing, as in the teaching of speaking, there is tension generated by different views of what teaching should focus on, though here these views have major implications for methodology. The main division continues to be between product, process, and genre approaches, the three approaches at the forefront of discussions of the teaching of writing in the last few decades (with some variation in terminology and conceptualization of the differences).

The relationship between these three approaches is complex. In many EFL classrooms, the main approach to writing is still very clearly product oriented. The focus is on models, with little if any thought of the way in which texts function in society; specific genres are provided as prescriptive models intended for copying with minimal adaptation, rather than as sources for generative discussion intended to further an understanding of the genre being explored. The tension that exists between the process approach (with its focus on the cognitive process of writing, on generating ideas, drafting, feedback from peers, and revising) and the genre approach (with its focus on language in use and an understanding of why texts are produced in the way that they are) is being played out in university contexts only. It is almost exclusively in these contexts that we find genre approaches or process approaches being implemented; the latter, in particular, have made barely a dent in teaching L2 writing in many educational levels and contexts. In the battle between genre approaches and process approaches, the winner is normally the impoverished product approach described above.

There is, however, some indication of a rapprochement between the different camps. Badger and White (2000) outline what they call 'a process genre approach', and similar ideas are also beginning to filter through to different contexts. Tribble (2010) provides an illuminating example of adapting a genre approach to test-taking situations at First Certificate in English level, with a variety of examples of traditional exercise types (for example scrambled paragraphs which need to be ordered correctly) being imaginatively used to help learners understand the functioning of the genres they are being asked to produce. Another example is Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta (2007), who present an adaptation of a genre approach to work with low-proficiency learners. (Interestingly, Firkins *et al.* describe the implementation of a genre approach in the context of students with learning difficulties, evidence of the growing engagement of EFL educators with learners with Special Educational Needs.)

## The continuing focus on feedback

The second major issue continuing to exercise teachers is feedback on learners' written production. This is the most common issue raised when teachers discuss the teaching of writing: the realities of the EFL classroom mean that teachers continue to be overwhelmed by the amount of feedback they need to provide, or perhaps more accurately, the amount of feedback they perceive they have to provide. Although research indicates what is at best scepticism about the efficacy of corrective feedback (see Bitchener and Knoch 2009 for a

recent survey of the debate), many teachers believe they have to provide comprehensive feedback on all the language issues that arise from a student text. This is paralleled by a strand of scholarship and research with a strong focus on feedback on linguistic categories, rather than on response to content. Thus, Ellis's (2009) typology for corrective feedback relates exclusively to error correction. Whereas in ESL contexts there is a strong focus on writing as communication and a focus on response to content, in EFL contexts most feedback on learner writing avoids responding to content (Furneau, Paran, and Fairfax 2007). Responding to content, of course, is one of the important tenets of the process approach to teaching writing, and in that respect, it is notable how little of this approach has filtered down to EFL classrooms. The divide noted above between writing at university and writing at other educational levels is thus apparent here as well.

One liberating element that has enabled writing in EFL classrooms to focus on real communication and on response to content has been technology. The near-ubiquity of the internet means that pairings between classrooms around the world are much easier to form. Learners are also much more likely to be motivated to use electronic media than to use pen and paper, and indeed in many contexts, learners will be doing most of their L1 writing through email and text messaging. The new writing technologies can be harnessed in a variety of ways in L2 teaching (though teachers point out that this has downsides when it comes to exams).

## Teaching reading

### Extensive reading

Although for many teachers communicative language teaching is still associated mainly with speaking, the challenge of understanding reading from a communicative angle was in fact picked up very quickly by reading specialists in the 1980s. Interestingly, a number of important volumes that came out at the time continue to exert a strong influence on the field, and the dominant view of reading, reading strategies, and teaching them that was developed in the 1980s is still valid in many respects. Our view of intensive reading does not seem to have changed greatly; what does seem to have changed is a rebalancing of reading focuses, with a fairly steady (though admittedly fairly slow as well) move from intensive reading to extensive reading.

Like many of the other ideas discussed in this paper, extensive reading is not new. However, it has been growing steadily over the last decade or so, with research evidence accumulating to show how it can be seen as a way of combining a large amount of input with an attention to individual needs and differentiation. Grabe (2009: 311) comments on the benefits of extensive reading, saying that 'no other set of reading activities or reading practice can substitute for reading a longer text with reasonable comfort and without needing to stop constantly, and without feeling fatigued or overwhelmed'. The question then arises of why the practice of extensive reading is not more widespread; as Renandya and Jacobs (2002) put it in their title, 'Why aren't we all doing it?'

The reasons are complex. One set of reasons has to do with the type of evidence that we have for the benefits of extensive reading. Grabe

(op.cit.) points out the difficulties in being able to experimentally provide support for the benefits of extensive reading: this requires longitudinal studies in which proficiency measures are tested before and after the experimental intervention and in which other variables are controlled. Because of the nature of the intervention, such studies are very few and far between. Most of the support for extensive reading comes from correlational studies and cannot therefore be taken as conclusive evidence of a causal relationship between the extensive reading programme and learner achievement. However, Grabe (op. cit.) suggests that the very large number of such studies, conducted over many years and in a variety of educational contexts, is sufficient to form a convincing argument and offset the weakness of correlational evidence. In terms of the classroom, what is probably more germane to the argument are the other reasons that Grabe cites, which have mainly to do with the perceptions of different stakeholders—teachers, parents, administrators, learners—of the efficacy of extensive reading, and the lack of immediate specific indicators of success or individual learning objectives which can be demonstrated to have been attained after even one session and which have come to dominate some educational contexts. (An interesting parallel to the point made earlier regarding the length of time needed to develop awareness of some phenomena of spoken English.) Extensive reading also involves devolving responsibility (in different measures) to the learners, something which some teachers may find difficult to do, preferring to maintain a central role in the classroom (Renandya and Jacobs op.cit.).

## The use of literature

Another area making a comeback in the teaching of reading is the use of literature in the language classroom, which figures notably more in the discussion of reading than previously. The literature/reading boundaries are not easy to define, but increasingly the use of literature is included in teacher handbooks about the teaching of reading (for example Hedgcock and Ferris 2009), as well as in research into reading and into comprehension processes (though this assumes that the processes of reading literature and of reading non-fiction are the same, which is not necessarily the case). This may well be because researchers realize that much of what most people read is fiction in one form or another, rather than non-fiction. This is bound up with the developments in the use of extensive reading, where the majority of the texts are likely to be fiction. There is also a realization that the way literature is taught can contribute to general language development; for example Kim (2004) shows how literature circles provide opportunities for interaction that go beyond the IRF sequence, thus illustrating the link between the different skills that I commented on earlier, and bringing home the point that reading does not exist in isolation from the ways in which we talk and communicate about it. There is increasingly imaginative use of contemporary literature as well as non-canonical literature, such as thrillers, techno-thrillers, and detective fiction, in a variety of settings (including, for example, English for Specific Purposes). Many teachers integrate the use of technology with literature. Both the use of literature and extensive reading are thus examples in which teachers and materials writers are beginning

to confront issues of ecological validity in the classroom, as well as incorporating understandings of the different ways we use language.

## Teaching listening

The impetus for change in the teaching of listening has been the recognition that **many learners find listening more difficult than most teachers realize.** In terms of teaching, listening has been the last of the skills to shake off what Field (2008) calls a comprehension approach, where the focus is on the product of listening, focusing mainly on answering comprehension questions at different levels; in effect, **testing listening rather than concentrating on teaching it** (see also Goh 2008). Whereas in the teaching of reading both researchers and teachers have been talking about strategies since the early 1980s, focusing on the process of reading rather than on comprehension as its elusive product, with listening it is only in the past few years that the **focus has shifted to the process of listening rather than on its product.** Within this shift two important strands stand out, both of which focus on the process of listening, though what is meant by the word 'process' is slightly different in each case: one is a renewed interest and focus on **decoding;** the other is a **focus on metacognition and raising the awareness of learners to the process of listening.**

## The role of decoding

Our understanding of the importance of decoding in listening is rooted in the fact that unlike the written word, the spoken word has many forms. This refers not only to different speakers with different accents, but also to the way in which even the same speaker will pronounce words differently in natural connected speech from the way they are pronounced in isolation. Almost any given word will have different forms depending on a variety of factors, including speed of delivery, register, and the phonetic environment. The result is that listeners at all levels, but overwhelmingly at lower levels of proficiency, **may experience difficulties in recognizing words.** Field (op.cit.) suggests a variety of exercises focusing on decoding at the phoneme, syllable, and word level. He suggests that within the multi-strand approach he proposes for the development of listening, the process development strand should focus on decoding for a substantial part of the learner's development.

## The role of metacognition

**A complementary approach is advocated by Goh (op.cit.), who focuses mainly on making the mental processes involved in listening clearer to learners.** Goh (ibid.) suggests that there are two main elements that learners need to develop. One is metacognitive knowledge, in which the learners develop an **understanding of themselves as listeners, understand the task of listening better, and understand the roles of different strategies in listening.** The second strand is **metacognitive strategies,** in which learners are able to plan their listening, monitor the progress of their comprehension, and evaluate the success of their listening. Interestingly, much of the language in which Goh (op.cit.) couches this second strand is similar to the language used in discussions of the development of **autonomy;** importantly, through such instruction, learners are hypothesized to learn to be able to set their own goals for listening outside the classroom. This is similar to

the points made by White (2006), who suggests that shifting much of the responsibility of learning listening to the learners is crucial in any changes in the methodology of teaching this skill.

## Conclusion: a spiky profile

The previous sections have outlined some of the developments in teaching the language skills in the last 15 years and the ways in which language teaching has become increasingly complex, with a more nuanced view of what learners need to achieve and a greater awareness of the complexity of achieving it. A number of developments are evident to different degrees: a better understanding of various aspects of language and of language processing; shifts in the view of what needs to be taught; a better conceptualization of the different language skills *qua* skills, and moving towards an understanding of how this skilled behaviour can be learnt, away from focusing on the use of the skill to learn language towards a focus on the skill itself; a balance of extensive and intensive input and practice and a balance between exposure to language and focus on specific elements; the focus on discoursal functions both for production and for comprehension; the increasing use of technology both in identifying what should be taught and how it is taught; a focus on autonomy and shifting the responsibility to the learner. There are also signs of a paradigm shift occurring in some places, moving from a focus on teachers and teaching to learners and learning. This shift is extremely productive in contexts where learners are adults who are willing to take responsibilities on themselves, or indeed, young learners. This shift is probably less productive, and less successful, where secondary classrooms are concerned.

Overall, the changes exhibit a spiky profile. Some areas have undergone great changes and possibly the beginning of a paradigm shift, others show slow changes resulting from implementations of previous theoretical developments, and others show little change. Indeed, the changes described above play out differently in different contexts, and it is crucial to recognize that many of the changes have 'been slow to percolate into materials development and, perhaps more importantly, teacher training', to quote Hughes's (op.cit.: 213) point about teaching speaking. To take the point further, even in cases where changes have been evident in materials or in training, they have often failed to penetrate the classroom. We do have increasing evidence that what was a veritable teaching revolution in the 1970s, with a variety of communicative approaches to language teaching, has not in fact filtered down to the teaching profession to the extent that we like to think it has. At best, the picture that emerges is of teachers battling with the conflict between their beliefs, their training, the realities of the classroom, the demands of parents and learners, the requirements to demonstrate immediate attainment, and the increasing focus on exams.

The challenge remains for future researchers, materials writers, and teacher trainers to find ways to work with teachers to facilitate classroom change and the identity shift mentioned above (including a shift away from the centre of the classroom) in environments where other change is overloading them, and to establish a way in which our understandings of language-teaching methodologies and of language



learning can be implemented in classrooms without being eroded. In this sense, it is not only impossible to separate the different skills from each other, but it is also impossible to separate changes in teaching them from the developments described in the other papers in this issue. Indeed, a surprising and possibly paradoxical conclusion to this overview might be that developments in teaching the four skills can only be achieved in the classroom through focusing on other aspects of teaching.

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