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Reading to Speak: Integrating Oral Communication Skills

According to Ur (1996, 120), "of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important." Indeed, whether for business or pleasure, a primary motivation to learn a second language is to be able to converse with speakers of that language. This explains why so many language learners are very interested in the speaking skill.

However, in addition to being an important skill, speaking is also a great challenge for foreign language learners, and students must master several difficult microskills, including the pronunciation of unfamiliar phonemes, the correct placement of stress and intonation, and the appropriate use of formal and informal expressions. To complicate matters, students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment have few opportunities to speak English outside of the classroom. There is little wonder then, that after more than ten years of study, college graduates in China are often incapable of effectively communicating with foreigners in English, a phenomenon known as *mute English*.

The status quo of teaching spoken English in China is plenty of time and money spent with unsatisfactory outcomes, a problem that has attracted the attention of the government.

As a Chinese proverb says, "poverty gives rise to a desire for change," and researchers and teachers now agree that there is no solution but reform. Opinions are divided on how to go about making a change in the way English is taught, although many see a problem with the traditional overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary in English classes where students receive intensive but separate practice in reading, writing, and listening, with no speaking involved. Even speaking classes do not provide chances for oral interaction, as most of the teachers talk on and on throughout the lesson without giving students any opportunity to speak, thus turning the class into a listening exercise.

Integrating oral communication skills

A reasonable solution is to support a more integrated approach,

where speaking is added to reading and writing lessons to ensure that students receive essential practice in oral communication. Since the listening skill is already a natural complement to any true speaking activity, adding speaking opportunities to a reading or writing lesson automatically allows students to integrate at least three skills. This integration has many advantages, as it adds variety, encompasses students' different strengths, and creates interactive possibilities by focusing on both productive and receptive skills. In addition, the interesting topics associated with reading and writing lessons lend themselves well to speaking tasks. This facilitates students' acquisition of English by providing them with topics to discuss and opportunities to test their language hypothesis.

In many cases, integrating skills will require teachers to shatter the boundaries between the traditional courses where the four skills are taught separately. To institute such a change, I introduced an oral language component into my intensive reading classes for intermediate level English majors.

Reading to speak

The following three activities provide students with opportunities to practice their spoken English. According to Swain (1995), when students produce English they may notice a gap between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say, leading them to recognize those language structures or elements that they do not know, or know only partially. But to me, a more important point is that the activities that appear in this article can help students notice the gap between what they *said* and what they *wanted to mean*, thus making them move from focusing their attention on meaning to focusing their attention on form. That is why these three activities stick to one basic principle—focusing students' attention first on meaning and secondly on form.

The integration of speaking and reading activities can be used in both intensive and extensive reading classes. Each activity is designed around a different reading text. The time allocated for each activity may be varied according to the difficulty of the task and the time limits of the class as a whole. If necessary, time may be allocated to review the materials involved before organizing these activities.

Activity 1: Read to act

This activity is designed to let students act out a story they read from a textbook or other source. The text selected for this activity should contain a plot involving more than one person. The plot should be represented through dialogues, so abstract stories may not be suitable. To make the activity more interesting, students are encouraged to use their imaginations and make any changes to the plot and dialogues in their performance. The activity is organized according to the steps outlined below.

> **Step 1:** The whole class is divided into groups, and each group selects a director. The job of the director is to assign different roles to students and organize the rehearsal of their performances.
> **Step 2:** Students scan the story while focusing on the plot, which will be expressed through their acting. Students do not take any notes at this point.
> **Step 3:** The directors lead their respective groups in planning and rehearsing their performances. Students do not refer to the text; they rely on their memories for the performance of the story.
> **Step 4:** After the first rehearsal, students scan the story again to see if they can make any variations to their performance, especially to their lines of dialogue. Students take notes about key words they will need to deliver their lines.
> **Step 5:** Students rehearse their performances a second time. If necessary, they may refer to their notes.
> **Step 6:** Finally, a competition is held to see which group offers the best performance of the story. Lots may be drawn to decide the order in which groups will perform in the competition.

A drama component makes a reading assignment much more interesting to students. It is also easy to achieve four-skill integration with an acting project, as students must read and write down their lines and then deliver them in an interactive setting.

Activity 2: Read to debate

This activity requires students to engage in a debate from an article that they find in a textbook or other source. The text selected for this activity should (1) discuss a controversial

issue, and (2) be within students' ability to discuss. The activity is organized according to the steps outlined below.

Step 1: Students scan the text while focusing on the controversial topic. Students do not take any notes at this point.

Step 2: Students form pairs and debate the issue with their partner. One student will argue in favor of the issue and one will argue against it. Students are required to quote ideas from the text to support their arguments.

Step 3: Students scan the article again to discover useful expressions and additional ideas to support their point of view. Students take notes of key words they will need.

Step 4: Students participate in a whole class or a group debate. Besides quoting ideas from the text, students are encouraged to personalize the topic with information about themselves.

A debate can deepen students' understanding of the issue discussed in the text. In addition, they learn how to view and orally defend a topic from a different perspective.

Activity 3: Read to interview

This activity is more flexible than the previous two. It is organized around texts from different genres, including persuasive, argumentative, or narrative texts. This activity is organized according to the steps outlined below.

Step 1: Students scan the text to get as many ideas as possible. They do not take any notes at this point.

Step 2: Students form pairs, and one member acts as the interviewer and the other the interviewee. The interviewer asks questions related to the content of the text. The interviewee is required to use the ideas or facts in the text to answer those questions.

Step 3: Students scan the text again to see if there are any other questions to ask. This time they take notes and write down some key words.

Step 4: Student pairs conduct the interview again, but this time they switch roles. They can find new partners, but they must play a different role than they did in Step 2.

Step 5: A competition is organized to see which pair can best represent the text through their interview.

This activity provides students with opportunities to orally represent ideas from the text they have read. It also helps them learn to ask questions about different issues.

Conclusion

Breaking the boundaries between traditional courses by integrating speaking skills improves students' communicative competence. In the activities described here, integrating speaking and reading skills deepens students' understanding of the reading material, reveals any problem they have understanding a text, and, most importantly, lets them apply the information they have read into authentic speaking practice that improves their fluency.

References

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