

Program Design and Components

Integration of Skills

For the purpose of clarification, reading, viewing, writing, other ways of representing, speaking and listening are discussed separately in this document. This is not to suggest that these skills will be taught separately; language is rarely used in one mode at a time. All four communicative skills will be integrated within the framework of this course.

Reading

Reading is a process of obtaining meaning from the written word. In addition to meaning, the ESL learner must deal with background knowledge which may differ from those of English first language students. Points to consider when planning reading activities are:

1) knowledge of the writing system and knowledge of the language

A principal problem of ESL readers is that their knowledge of the language is incomplete, and this may cause serious difficulty with some texts. A fundamental difference between native speakers and ESL learners is that the former use knowledge of the language to help them read and the latter use the reading to help them learn the language. Students need experience with a wide range of authentic texts and with a variety of reading tasks. Providing a rich reading environment will assist in the acquisition of the second language.

2) ability to interpret

Reading is more than looking at and understanding sentences in isolation. Understanding the 'plain sense' of sentences is essential, but it is not enough. Effective readers bring with them the ability to recognize the purpose of the text as a whole, to see how the text is organized, and how to understand the relationship between sentences. In a general sense, we may refer to this as the 'ability to interpret'.

Many ESL students have difficulty 'following' the writer. They may be accustomed to texts where the writer provides clear 'signposts' which indicate how sentences are to be interpreted. ESL students may be unable to see how paragraphs are to be interpreted and related to each other in the development of the text. 'Text attack' strategies focusing on connectives, references, and vocabulary are essential if ESL students are to master the skills of interpretation.

3) knowledge of the world

Knowledge of the world does not apply only to knowledge of a particular topic. It may include familiarity with different text types or knowledge of a particular culture or way of life. For instance, some texts assume a knowledge of the current political situation, or of the world of sports or entertainment. This can, of course, be a problem even for a reader who speaks the same language as the writer. However, for the ESL student the problem could be greater because his/her cultural background may be quite different from the author's.

The ESL teacher should encourage students to share the knowledge they have on a topic, and should try to provide appropriate background and develop the same topic through a series of texts and activities. When none of the above is possible, the chosen text may not be appropriate.

4) a reason to read which determines the reading style

There are different styles of reading, and these are determined not by the text, but by the reason for reading. Effective readers are readers who are able to adapt their style to their purpose and who do not read everything slowly and intensively. Many ESL students consider that the only appropriate style for them is intensive reading. They will read every word and will stop reading as soon as they encounter a word which is unfamiliar.

It is therefore important to give learners practice in different reading styles. This is achieved by setting tasks which encourage the students to skim and scan as well as to read intensively. Activities which encourage students to predict the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary from contextual cues are also recommended.

The Three-Stage Approach It is recommended the the three-stage approach be used to help foster effective reading skills.

1) Pre-reading:

introduces and arouses interest in the topic/theme/text;

motivates students by giving them a reason to read;

provides some language preparation for the text. This stage should involve listening and reading skills.

2) While-reading:

clarifies text content;

helps students to understand the writer's purpose;

enables students to understand the structure of the text

3) Post-reading:

allows students to consolidate or reflect upon what has been read;

relates the text to the learners' own knowledge, interests, or views. This stage may involve speaking, listening or writing.

Guidelines for reading activities

The following guidelines should be considered when planning activity-based lessons:

The student is an active participant not a passive recipient. It is essential that the activities provoke a genuine interaction between the reader and the text and among all readers in the classroom.

The activities should offer ample opportunities for the students to contribute and share their own experiences, perceptions, and opinions.

The text is not the only element in the activity. It is one key element in a linked set of activities, which may include preliminary discussion, interactive work involving the text, and some follow-up, often in writing.

Answering comprehension questions is not always the most useful type of activity to exploit information in a text. Rather, other activities (completing charts, checklists, summary writing, comparing and contrasting, interpreting quotations, interpreting a poster or a collage) may be more appropriate to a particular text. The content of the text should indicate the type of activity which would be most appropriate for a reading comprehension exercise, and alternatives to the traditional question/answer format should be developed.

Writing

A Process Approach to Writing

The teaching of writing in ESL emphasizes the process of writing. In a process approach, students explore a topic through writing, showing their drafts to the teacher and their peers. They revise, edit and move on to new ideas. In a process approach, teachers give their students two very important supports: time to try out ideas and feedback on the content and form of their drafts. “The writing process becomes a process of discovery for the students; discovery of new ideas and new language to express those ideas.” (Raimes 1983)

Effective writers go through a process of:

- pre-writing
- composing, drafting and revising
- editing and proofreading
- presenting and/or publishing

Writing activities in the ESL classroom should always reflect this process.

Guidelines for Writing Activities

The following guidelines should be considered when planning writing activities:

- Tasks need to be set up in ways that reflect the writing process in good writers. Encourage the students to go through a process of planning, organizing, composing and revising.
- Collaborative writing in the classroom generates discussions and activities which encourage an effective process of writing.
- Tasks should reflect the ultimate goal of enabling students to write whole texts which form connected, contextualized pieces of communication.
- The teacher should provide opportunities for controlled, guided and free writing activities.
- Students need opportunities to practise various forms and functions in writing to develop the different skills involved in producing written texts.
- When assigning writing tasks, the teacher should vary the audience, identify the readers, and try to make every piece of writing fulfill some communicative purpose, whether real or simulated.

- Students need time in the classroom for writing. The teacher's task is to design activities which support the students through the process of producing a piece of writing.
- The process of error correction should be modified to include peer editing by the students as well as the teachers, making revision an integral part of the process.

Listening

Since ESL students come from a variety of native languages, listening activities in English present potential difficulties that are not problematic for most English first language learners.

1) Hearing the sounds

Some ESL students do not perceive certain English sounds because these do not exist in their own language. The 'th' sound /θ/ as in thick, for example, does not exist in Cantonese or Mandarin. Therefore, native Chinese speakers often do not notice that it occurs in English. They may simply assimilate it to the nearest sound familiar to them and say /t/ or /f/. It is essential for the learners to achieve familiarity with the phonemes of the English language if they are to be efficient listeners. If they learn to pronounce the sounds accurately, it will be much easier for them to hear the sounds correctly when said by someone else.

2) Lack of control over speed

Many ESL students feel that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that the listener cannot control how quickly the spoken message is given. They feel that the utterances disappear, as it were, before they can understand them, whereas the words in a written text remain on the page where the reader can glance back at them or re-examine them thoroughly. This frequently means that students who are listening cannot keep up. They are so busy working out the meaning of one part of the message that they miss the next part. Students should be encouraged not to worry if they don't understand every word. They should learn that a listening task can often be completed even when they miss some of the words. In this way students can begin to appreciate that comprehension can occur with less than complete understanding of all that is said.

3) Listener's limited vocabulary

Sometimes, listeners can deduce the meaning of a word from its context. However, more often than not for ESL students an unknown word can be like a suddenly dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of the word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech.

Students need to develop the skill of 'keeping up' with the speaker even if this means letting parts which they have not understood pass by.

4) Failure to recognize signals

There are many ways in which a speaker can indicate that he/she is moving on from one point to another, or giving an example, or repeating a point. These signals are not immediately evident to a person listening to a foreign language and can easily be missed.

Lecturers, in a formal situation, generally show clearly that they are about to begin a new point. They use expressions like 'secondly' or 'then'. They may pause or make a gesture or move slightly. They may mark a change to a new point by increased loudness or a clear change of pitch. In spontaneous conversation, a speaker will make use of different intonation to indicate whether he/she is introducing a new idea or saying something the listener already knows.

Students need to learn to listen (and if the speaker is visible, watch) the signals in order to be able to connect the various utterances in the way the speaker intended them to be connected.

5) Problems of interpretation.

Sharing common meaning and assumptions makes communication possible. Students who are unfamiliar with the context may have considerable difficulty in interpreting the words they hear even if they can understand their 'surface' meaning. Effective pre-listening activities can usually minimize this problem.

6) Learning Environment

In the past, ESL teachers have often aimed to teach their students to understand everything in the English lesson, by repeating sentences, pronouncing words carefully, by grading the language to suit the level of the students, by speaking slowly and pausing frequently. If students are to be prepared for listening in the real world, teachers must provide language models, both live and taped, which reflect the reality of communication outside the classroom.

7) Environmental cues

Many second language learners seem to lack the ability to use environmental cues to get at the meaning of a misunderstood utterance. The problem is not the lack of skill in perceiving extra-linguistic cues but in the ability to apply this skill in second language listening. ESL listeners have to work much harder at decoding than native listeners. They try to interpret every detail as it comes up instead of relaxing and taking a broader view.

Teachers need to encourage the students to relax and gather what they can from the information they can readily decode. Activities in listening for specific information, ignoring unnecessary details, listening for general meaning, and coping with redundancy and noise can encourage a relaxed approach to listening comprehension. This will help to free the listener to exploit all available clues to meaning.

8) Understanding different accents

ESL students who are used to the accent of their own teacher are often surprised and dismayed to find they have difficulty understanding someone else. Learners who have some experience in listening to and understanding a number of different accents are more likely to be able to cope successfully with additional accents than those students who have heard only one.

9) Intonation and stress

The English systems of stress, intonation and rhythm can interfere with the second language learner's understanding of spoken English. Therefore, students' attention should be drawn to the existence of certain general patterns.

Listening and Note-Taking

Listening in class and taking notes involves more than language skills alone. Lecture comprehension and note-taking require skills in evaluating information (deciding what needs to be focused on and noted), skills in organizing information and skills in predicting upcoming information (allowing listeners to use time effectively when listening.) Students must also become familiar with the various styles and accents of lecturers; decode and use notes for study purposes and prepare for classroom discussion and debates.

Classroom materials used should be authentic in style as well as function. Students should be motivated to listen to the lectures not just because they need to do a language task, but because they want to learn the information the lectures contain. A sufficient number and variety of lectures should be included to allow teachers to choose topics based on students' interests and needs. Teachers may choose to deliver some of the lectures 'live', to use tapes of a variety of speakers or to combine both of these methods.

Live delivery of the lectures by ESL teachers cannot, of course, be completely authentic. ESL teachers adapt their language to fit the level of their non-native audience. Although it is impossible to erase all such "teacher talk" from lecture delivery, teachers should be aware how much they are adapting their language. Teachers should aim for a normal rate of speech, usual vocabulary, and a natural amount of repetition and paraphrase.

Speaking

The communicative approach to speaking a second language ensures that the interactions in the classroom are replications of, and necessary prerequisites for, communication in the real world.

One device which helps the teacher in creating communicative activities is the 'information gap'. Information gap activities force the participants to exchange information in order to find a solution. One reason why the information gap is useful for the teaching of speaking is that it creates a condition of unexpectedness. If student A does not know in advance what student B will say to him, the former cannot work out his/her reply in advance; he/she is forced to formulate his/her responses quickly. This type of activity permits genuine information flow in the classroom.

The creation of a speaking task then is essential in communicative activities. However, there is sometimes the problem of students who do not participate in an activity because there is no motivation for doing so. What is needed also is accountability on the part of the students. Requiring the students to utilize information obtained in the course of an activity is the 'task dependency' principle. According to it, we create wherever possible, a Task 2 which can only be done if a Task 1 has been successfully completed.

For the teaching of the receptive skills, the task dependency principle is crucial to ensure that the listening or reading task gets done. But it is also relevant to the productive skills because it helps to foster an 'accountability' for the way a student uses the language.

Guidelines for Speaking Activities

- Provide the students with a balanced approach. Students need practice in accuracy work and opportunities for fluency work through a combination of class, pair and group work.
- Vary the tasks. Activities in the classroom should always mirror the linguistic reality of the outside world.
- Remember that language happens in situations and in order for students to be able to use it they need to realize in what situations certain pieces of language are used.
- Give students a purpose for speaking. In real life when two people engage in conversation, we can be fairly sure that they are doing so for a reason.
- Ensure that every lesson ends with the learners being able to see that they can do something which they could not do at the beginning and that the 'something' is communicatively useful.
- Give the students choices in terms of what they will say and the linguistic forms they will use. Exercises in which the speaker and listener are controlled in their language by the teacher fail to practise an essential aspect of true communication.
- Mistakes are often signposts of learning. Learners who make mistakes because they are trying to do something they have not been shown how to do are not making mistakes at all. They are trying to deal with a situation for which they are unprepared.

- Language is learned by using it and it is only by practising communication that students learn to communicate. However, there is still great value in a framework within which learning can be structured, and the provision of this framework is the responsibility of the teacher.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation errors that second language learners make are not just random attempts to produce unfamiliar sounds. Rather, they reflect the sound inventory, rules of combination, and the stress and intonation patterns of the native language.

Consequently, one question that a teacher might ask concerns the degree of difficulty that different native languages pose for learning the pronunciation of English. For example, because the sound systems of English and Cantonese differ more than the sound systems of English and Russian, is it more difficult for a Cantonese speaker to acquire English pronunciation than for a Russian speaker? If so, does this mean that it is more important to teach pronunciation to Cantonese speakers than to Russian speakers? The answer to both of these questions is 'perhaps'. However, socio-cultural and personality factors will also determine the degree of a learner's pronunciation problems. In other words, native language is not the only factor affecting pronunciation in a second language. It is one of several factors suggesting that teachers cannot decide, without first listening to their students, which learners will necessarily need more pronunciation practice.

A knowledge of the English sound system helps teachers to identify and isolate the most important pronunciation problems of their students.

A diagnostic profile sheet is advisable for each student as it provides a record of strengths and weaknesses, permits the recording of progress within a specific area and allows the teacher to develop priorities for a particular individual or group. The following categories should be used in such a profile:

General Speaking Habits

- **Clarity:** Is the student's speech muffled because she/he speaks with a hand covering the mouth or because the head is held down?
- **Speed:** Does inaccurate articulation occur because the student speaks too quickly?
- **Breath Groups:** Does the student speak with appropriate pauses, breaking up a sentence into thought groups?

Intonation

- Is the student using appropriate intonation patterns, i.e. rising intonation for yes/no questions, pitch change at major stress words in a sentence, etc. ?

Stress and Rhythm

- Word level stress: Can the student pronounce schwa in unstressed syllables? Can the student use length to differentiate between stressed and unstressed syllables?
- Sentence level stress: Is the student able to produce appropriate strong and weak stresses? Are content and function words unstressed? Is the major sentence stress on the appropriate words?
- Linking: Is the student linking words appropriately within sentences?

Consonants

- Substitution: Is the student substituting a different consonant for the appropriate one, i.e. /t/ for unvoiced /th/?
- Omission: Is the student omitting consonants, i.e. /pey/ for /peys/?
- Articulation: Is the consonant being properly articulated, i.e. /p/. Is /p/ part of an aspirated word initially?
- Clusters: Is the consonant properly articulated in clusters, i.e. the initial voiced /th/ in 'there', the /str/ in 'street'?
- Linking: Is the consonant being properly linked in connected speech, i.e. are flaps produced in appropriate places?

Vowels

- Substitution: Is the student substituting one vowel for another i.e. /a/ for /æ/?
- Articulation: Is the student articulating vowels sounds properly, i.e. are the lips rounded for /u/, as in the double o sound in 'school'?
- Length: Does the student have the appropriate length, i.e. the long /e/ vowel in pronouncing /speed/ versus /sped/?
- Reduction: Are vowels reduced in unstressed syllables, i.e. the second vowel in 'campus' pronounced as schwa?
- Linking: Are vowels being properly linked across two-word boundaries, i.e. two oranges?

Integration of Grammar into the Curriculum

The 1970s saw a shift in emphasis from the teaching of language as a closed set of forms to the teaching of language as an openended series of communicative functions. In the classroom this led to a shift in emphasis from developing formal accuracy to developing functional fluency.

Today it is widely accepted that “ability to communicate is not obtained most quickly or efficiently through pure communication practice in the classroom -not, at least, within the framework of a formal course” (Larsen-Freeman 1995). Findings of immersion studies suggest that when language learning is purely communicative, some linguistic features do not ultimately develop to target levels. (Lightbown & White 1987).

It is therefore no longer a question of whether to teach grammar in the classroom. It is a question of how. If the concept of grammar teaching is revised and it occupies its central place in the language curriculum, it becomes not discrepant but in harmony with educational and personal aspirations.

Guidelines for Teaching Grammar

- The total programme should allow students to make discoveries about language by exposing them to a large quantity of language and encouraging them to experiment with its use in real communication. Students need to talk, read, and write extensively.
- Grammatical explanations and descriptions are valuable if they improve the efficiency of the language learning process. The nature and timing of grammatical descriptions should be carefully considered for each class. It should not be necessary to refer to complex theories or complex terminology in giving grammatical explanations.
- Knowing the rules underlying English usage refers not only to form but also to the function.
- Complete accuracy at each stage is an unrealistic expectation in any learning situation. By meeting structures in new and different contexts, over a period of time, and by trying them out in speaking and in writing, students gradually gain control over them.
- The organization and selection of structures in the course will depend upon the particular needs of the students. Structures should be introduced in many different contexts in a spiral arrangement.
- Grammar activities should be communicative and meaningful.

Intermediate Grammar

In the context of ESL 2205, intermediate grammar refers to:

- the more advanced tenses (past perfect, future perfect, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive and future perfect progressive);
- advanced rules related to number (e.g. irregular noun plurals, non-count nouns, irregular or advanced rules of subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement with collective, generic and non-count nouns);
- modals of logical probability and social interaction, in a range of tenses, (e.g. can, could (have), should (have), may (have), might (have), etc.);
- passives;
- complex sentences (noun and adjective clauses).

Intermediate vocabulary refers to basic abstract and academic vocabulary used in authentic texts, such as textbooks and novels. For sample vocabulary, see Reader's Choice, an authorized learning resource for this course.

