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Integrating Skills in the ELT Lessons via LMS.

by Firos Kalarikkal

Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has stalled almost every sphere of life temporarily. While other sectors face a huge deadlock, educators turned the challenges into opportunities. Many more innovations came into practice in the teaching and learning process during the pandemic. However, there are many more issues to be faced and dealt with successfully. Integrating all the four language macro skills of English language while delivering lessons via online platforms including Learning Management Systems (LMS) is such a key issue that teachers faced during their online teaching. Since LMSs are web-based technology and these software systems facilitate platform to plan, implement and assess a learning module or a course, technology has an increased grip on day to day teaching learning process. This influence is more evident in EFL/ESL classes where effective online tools on varied LMS provide room for tailored teaching and better academic performance of learners.

What is an Integrated Language Lesson?

Integrated language teaching and learning happens when different language skills are practiced with focus concurrently. All the four macro skills of a language, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing are in the limelight of the lesson. Richards and Rogers (2001) defined integrated language lessons in this direction as lessons involve activities that relate listening and speaking to reading and writing. Afnan (2014) stated that this approach employs two or more language skills in a lesson or a task. In other words, by integrating skills, language classes are a bit different from the traditional style of teaching skills separately. Teachers need to plan well in order to have full-fledged integrated skill teaching elements even in their lessons given via LMSs.

High Demand for Integrated Lessons.

The arguments and debates over if integrated or segregated approaches are suitable for language learning are a thing of the past. According to Jing (2006), integrated methods are widely discussed and recognized as the best means for the development of communicative competence. This pertains to the ever widening need of a learner to be involved in a process that reflects real life challenges of using a foreign language. Jing (2006) substantiates his argument by saying that multiple skills are used for communication in day to day life. Staying with this point of view, Nunn (2006) also opined that the holistic approach for integrating skills in language lessons has gained prominence in the ELT world. Teachers around the globe had been constantly practicing this approach in their face to face lessons before the pandemic. However, integrated lessons became a real challenge when the lessons went online and thus this topic has been brought even more to the forefront.

> **"Integrated lessons became a real challenge when the lessons went online and thus this topic has been brought even more to the forefront."**

The Challenge

Though there are plenty of LMSs for different purposes, there is not enough specialized learning software to impart language lessons meritoriously. This affects the appropriate application of language teaching-learning methodologies including the integrated skills approach and eventually it will result in not achieving learning objectives. For example, having group work was not possible on Microsoft Teams until it introduced the breakout rooms facility. Even breakout room activities for group or pair work should be assigned carefully. Giving roles in the group/pair will ensure potential input from individual students. In order to add quality to the integrated skills lessons online, the young learners, especially at tertiary level, can benefit from the audio/video lessons by means of social networks. It should be done in view that the listening as a passive skill can enrich the learner's speaking skill as a productive skill. Thus, more careful and practical study and suggestions need to be popped up. An example situation is explained below:

(Lesson courtesy: https://elllo.org/english/1501/1525-RachelTodd-PastNow-Teens.htm)

Here, the teacher aims students to reinstate past tenses and by a listening activity followed by a speaking task. The topic of the listening script is about 'How life was different in the 80s in America and New Zealand.' The teacher plays the video/audio from and students listen to/watch it in small groups taking notes of important information in bullet points. After the first and second listen, students discuss their notes in their groups and form ideas on how to present these notes in the form of speaking. The teacher facilitates and monitors the activities to ensure the smooth transition from one skill to another. In this scenario, main skills like listening and speaking, sub-skills such as grammar and study skills such as note-taking are beautifully integrated and well-practiced. The flow chart below explains how a listening activity well lead to speaking practice.

Integrating listening skill into speaking skill - flowchart by author (lucidchart.com)

Pic by Author
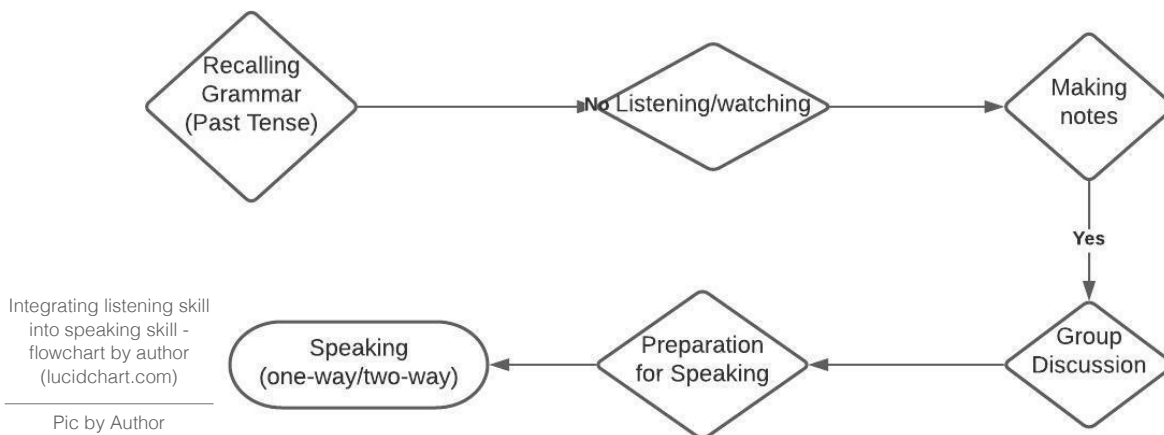
Teachers have to take their practice of the holistic approach of language teaching into the online lessons. The real life situations demand the learner to be immersed into all four interwoven skills. In other words, the classroom should not lose the vicinity of the real world. In this direction, teachers are encouraged to give ample space for collaborative learning among students. This can be achieved by framing the lesson plan with a room for integrated practices in reading and writing for some lessons and in listening and speaking for some other occasions. As reading (Passive Skill) facilitates ideas for writing (Active Skill) tasks and listening (Passive Skill) gives tips for speaking (Active Skill), the integration happens to bring better learning. The rendering of the lesson activity suits the purpose of creating social nature of the tasks by group work or pair work in all the skills. This will enable the learner to use the language in context. Also, it is found that interchanging classroom activities for above mentioned skills will add up more cognitive ability. Devising and administering proper activities is a real challenge of the time as most lessons are given through varied LMS. Thus, teachers are required to update themselves to facilitate effective integration of skills in their lessons.

Text book contents vs Self-prepared materials
In order for teachers to provide integrated lessons, careful and blended use of content from both prescribed textbooks and self-prepared material. Therefore, a well devised plan for the lesson is needed. The plan should incorporate all the three folds of ELT lessons namely skills, system and phonology. The last two items-system and phonology- can be sub themes of a skill lesson. For example, if the main focus of the lesson is speaking (skill), the elements of phonology should be made as one of the sub-targets. The lesson will include a listening part and eventually, this particular lesson becomes integrated. As a facilitator, you need to provide students with ample opportunity to engage and practice the language they encounter in their day to day life. Likewise, in a writing lesson, guided reading can be given to prepare students for the writing task.

Online Classes
As many teachers have experienced during the pandemic, having skills integrated in a lesson that is delivered on LMS can be highly challenging. However, it is not a herculean task as many platforms give features to facilitate collaborative learning such as group or peer activities online. According to Harasim (2012), Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) provides a model of learning in which students are encouraged and supported to work together to create knowledge. For instance, on Microsoft teams, the 'Breakout Rooms' is a fine tool for productive collaboration. Small groups of students of a class can work on the assigned task and then the teacher can invite members from different groups to present the results of their work. Using the 'class notebook' facility is another convenient resort on MS Teams. Here, teachers can assign roles to individual students and lead to the whole class production of end-result. In a writing lesson, the teacher pastes a sample text and asks Comprehension Checking Questions (CCQs) to familiarize students with the format of the particular type of writing. In the case of an email writing context, learners will be able to understand the format and style of email writing by reading the sample email that the teacher presented in the class notebook area of MS Teams. After eliciting the different steps of email writing, the teacher can lead students to 'a chain writing' task in which volunteers (or teacher assigned students) produce parts of the email. The final result will be learners' full comprehension of writing an email without error.

Moodle is another platform where teachers can use many of its features such as forums, chats, blogs, and workshops to apply different ways of interaction and collaboration for the content they want to teach. The integration of skills and sub skills can be achieved by segregating the whole class into small groups and assigning tasks to them to produce the lesson objectives.

An asynchronous way of learning has got an impetus in this time of online learning and therefore, all LMS platforms have the facility to provide audio-video lectures, study materials, mock tests etc. These can be accessed by the students anytime they prefer and go through at their own pace. Therefore, teachers need to carefully prepare, upload and assign assignments periodically in such a way that all the macro skills can be practiced concurrently. This will enable students to achieve the envisaged aim of the course outline.

Conclusion

English language learning can get a paradigm shift through careful and effective use of learning management systems for integrated language lessons to promote meaningful application and synthesis of skills. The key role to bring this change into effect lies in the hands of educators and they must be aware of e-learning pedagogy with practical strategy.

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