## Integrating the Four Skills for the Next Generation of Japanese Teachers of English

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#### Abstract

This article outlines the approach to teaching two related courses: Speaking & Listening, and Reading & Writing. It explains first the importance of integrating these courses into a four-skills curriculum, and then how this is achieved in practice by means of a combination of Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Instruction. Finally it describes how this integrated skills course achieves the parallel function of preparing teacher-license students to conduct similar courses themselves in Japanese school contexts.

## Background of Tsuru University English Department English Skills courses

While the English Department has delivered an effective English language skills training package up until now, we are continually seeking to develop that effectiveness, especially in the light of our students' current and projected needs for English, including those related to teaching careers in the Japanese education system.

Up until now, the four skills have been taught individually, and in no particular order, as Eikaiwa (英会話), Eisakubun (英作文), LL Enshuu (演習), and Eibunkoudoku (英文講読) — these representing Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading respectively. Meanwhile, it should be added that Eibunkoudoku, as its title suggests, has focused specifically on fostering students' reading skills for English literature to the exclusion of other reading genres.

However, in recognition of the benefits of treating the four skills as interrelated, from 2012 we began an experiment with an integrated skills curriculum, by first creating a top stream of first year English major students and then assigning them the same teacher for both Eikaiwa and Eisakubun classes. Put simply, each semester was divided into 3 consecutive task sequences (units), each sequence based on a different theme and involving a multi-skilled progression towards a larger outcome within that theme.

Figure 1: Sample Unit Flow – Study Abroad Unit

### **Learning outcomes:**

- Speaking: Engage effectively in a discussion on the pros and cons of study abroad.
- Writing: Compose a response to the following IELTS Writing Task 2 essay prompt: 'If you major in a foreign language at university you should spend one year of your studies in a country where that language is spoken' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this view?.

## Sample unit flow:

Lesson 1: Converse with peers regarding study abroad experience, future hopes/plans; gain familiarity with the range of study-abroad programs available at Tsuru University; focus on vocabulary related study abroad (expressing advantages and disadvantages).

Lesson 2: Focus on the argument essaywriting genre (structure; cohesion); write an outline for the response to the IELTS Task 2 study abroad essay prompt (see above).

Lesson 3: Focus on discussion skills (expressions for generalizing & specifying); engage in a group discussion based on the IELTS Task 2 study abroad essay prompt.

Lesson 4: Revise the outline for the response to the IELTS Task 2 essay prompt; peer review outlines; begin writing in class, then complete for homework.

Student feedback to this integrated skills format (in the form of end-of-course survey response) was extremely positive, and combined with my own reflections, strongly validated this new direction.

#### The next step

As a somewhat natural progression, from 2019 the four skills courses are due to be integrated into the following two courses: Listening & Speaking, and Reading & Writing. This development recognizes the need for a broader conception of Reading beyond Literature, skills training especially to foster students' capacity to tackle academic reading texts. Moreover, these combined of courses acknowledge the natural connection between the so-called active and passive skills. And while these two courses will mainly be taught separately, the top stream of Freshman students will have the same instructor for both combined courses, thus enabling a fully integrated four-skills curriculum.

# Why an integrated four-skills curriculum?

Having laid out the background to this curriculum development, this is an apt point at which to justify an integrated skills approach to language teaching. It is perhaps most efficient to start from Oxford's (2001) much cited and very succinct explanation of the various benefits of an integrated skills approach:

- '[1.It] exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language...
- [2.] stresses that English is not just an object of academic interest nor merely a key to passing an examination...
- [3.] allows teachers to track students' progress in multiple skills at the same

time...

- [4.] promotes the learning of real content, not just the dissection of language forms...
- [5.] can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds.' (2001, para.18)

In other words, this approach reflects the nature and demands of real-life communication, harnesses its innate interest, and equally importantly forces students to reassess their perception of English.

# How to achieve an integrated four-skills curriculum?

In a loose sense, this kind of curriculum occurs naturally in the course of both language learning and language use. Therefore, it is not a huge jump to consciously construct a curriculum which, to employ Oxford's (2001) analogy, weaves together all four skills in a well-knit tapestry. In terms of a specific modus operandi, the approach I have used in the existing curriculum and will continue to use in the new courses from 2019, combines elements of both Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Instruction.

## > Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

Of the three types of CBI identified by Scarcella & Oxford (1992), I employ the theme-based type. In practice, this means that the four skills and their associated subskills are coached within a given thematic context, by setting up task sequences using topics, ideas, and associated lexis in one integrated whole, and thus reflecting reallife language use and giving classroom activities more relevance and more motivational capacity.

#### > Task-Based Instruction (TBI)

Task-Based Instruction (also known as Task-based Language Teaching) has become one of the most commonly employed methodologies in EFL and ESL educational settings where a CLT approach has been adopted (Nunan, 2003: 6-7), and yet not so common in Asian settings where *synthetic* approaches to syllabus design are the norm (Nunan, 2006: 13-14), predominantly realizing themselves in grammar-translation methodology. Nunan goes on to list the specific features of TBLT as follows:

- 'A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.' Nunan (2006: 14)

As well as echoing key elements of Oxford's (2001) description of an integrated skills approach, namely in the use of authentic materials and an emphasis

on interactive tasks, the list highlights the importance of personalizing the language learning process in several ways. First, the curriculum should be geared towards fulfilling the needs of the learners in terms of the target language. Second, it should allow the learners to express themselves and talk about their lives using the target language. And finally, it should foster their autonomy in language learning: raising their awareness of their goals, and strengths & weaknesses, as well as helping them develop effective learning strategies to achieve those goals.

# Putting it all together: Integrated-Skills, CBI & TBI in Context

Let us now look at how this combination of CBI and TBI methodologies, based on an Integrated-Skills Approach, has been realized in the author's context.

#### Focus on the students' needs

Tsuru University has enjoyed a strong and long-lasting reputation as a teachertraining institution since its foundation, and hence many students join the English Department to take the Teaching Licence program with a view to becoming Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs). In addition, our Global Careers Program has proved very attractive to an equally broad range of students.

Therefore the syllabus has been developed to enable students not just to communicate confidently and effectively in English in a range of educational and business situations but also increase their capacity to engage in self-directed learning by making them aware of a range of learning strategies. This recognizes that learning a

second language, as with any kind of learning, is not a finite process and will need to continue far beyond graduation. Moreover, those students who go on to become language teachers themselves also need to able to foster such a capacity in their own students.

Third, students need to broaden their knowledge of culture: both the target language culture and their own Japanese culture, since use of a second language cross-cultural inevitably entails communication. However, in the case of learning English as a second language, students need to recognize that there is no single culture associated with English: not only is there a range of countries where English is spoken either as a native or official language, but there is also the reality of English as the world's primary lingua franca and the fact that our students are more likely to communicate in English with non-native English speakers than native English speakers. Therefore it is insufficient and inappropriate simply to teach them American or British culture.

#### > Content

Themes and topics have been selected to reflect the students' needs as outlined above. These include: independent language learning & learning strategies; study abroad; jobs & careers; culture; innovation in business – crowd-funding.

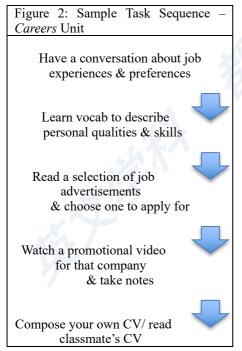
#### Tasks

These naturally involve all four skills, but also reflect the students' needs in that they represent the types of English communicative tasks that the students (and the students' future students, in the case of

those who will go on to become teachers) are likely to face in their future careers and life in general. As one would expect with a CLT approach, a key feature of these tasks is the exchange of meaning, along with an underlying purpose for that exchange, whether it be interpersonal or transactional.

### > Task sequences

As with the language skills, tasks are not seen as isolated units. Rather, they allow for the integration of the skills through the setting up of task sequences. A sample task sequence, based on the theme of *Careers*, specifically applying for a job, can be seen in Figure 2 below.



# Phone to arrange a job interview have a job interview/ run a job interview

# What does all this mean for future JTEs?

Through participation in an integrated skills course based on CBI and TBI, students enrolled in the Teaching Licence program are exposed to a teaching approach which is not simply CLT in name employs a methodology which promotes meaningful communication via task sequences interrelated via both reallife content and real-life communication Secondly, and of equal sequences. importance, through the course's inclusion of language learning strategy training, the students' awareness of the language learning process is raised so that they can not only enhance their own learning but also pass on such awareness and skills to their future charges.

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