



P-ISSN 2355-2794
E-ISSN 2461-0275

Integrating EFL Skills for Authentically Teaching Specific Grammar and Vocabulary

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Abstract

When a person uses a language in an authentic setting, skills such as speaking, reading, writing and listening are naturally integrated to achieve communicative competence. Therefore, this research is based on the use of a content-based instruction model and the communicative language approach to teach English as a foreign language (EFL). The activities described in this article integrate language skills using communicative activities to learn and practice the present perfect and associated new vocabulary. All the skills were evaluated through qualitative informal assessments and quantitative formal testing to see if the chosen strategies could aid in attaining the goals set by the professor and could allow for authentic learning by the participants. This qualitative and quantitative research used 33 sample students, pre- and post-evaluations of all four skills, and questionnaires about the students' knowledge of the present perfect post-treatment and the opinions of the students about the types of strategies and educational models used to integrate the four language skills in their classes. These results were then used to find out how these teaching strategies could aid in student teaching-learning. The tools used aided in the results were to find out how to integrate communication skills throughout the lessons in the classroom to allow for a more fluid and in-depth learning experience for the intermediate students that participated in this research done at UNAE, Ecuador.

Keywords: Communicative integrated skills learning, authentic language skills, English language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are many strategies, approaches and methods to effectively teach English as a foreign language (EFL) as [Richards \(2006\)](#) discusses in his book about communicative teaching strategies. Through the research presented in this paper, communicative integrated language teaching or (CILT) can be seen as an effective method to promote and create a more genuine learning environment for EFL students in the National University of Education (Universidad Nacional de Educación or UNAE) in Ecuador as language learning follows a content based instructional model. Students follow an English language textbook and learn specific content depending on the unit and level they are studying. There is also very little opportunity to practice and learn English language in authentic situations and settings outside of the classroom. Since Ecuador is primarily a Spanish speaking country and according to a study completed by [Education First \(2017\)](#), Ecuador rates 55th out of 80 countries for English proficiency. This ranking is considered low compared to other countries around the world. This means there is not a lot of English spoken in the country. Students learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and therefore do not get many opportunities outside of the classroom for authentic practice. Therefore, it becomes one of the teacher's functions to facilitate an environment that promotes learning through integration of language skills.

CILT integrates listening, speaking, pronunciation, grammar, reading and writing into a single lesson to increase the ability of students to communicate using English naturally. It has been seen by the professor that in everyday communication most language skills are not separated, therefore it is not helpful for the students to learn the skills separately. This concept is supported by [Su \(2007\)](#) who sees integrating skills as an integral part of language teaching. No-one only listens, speaks, reads or writes while participating in active communication and social interactions. There is always a combination of various skills in natural interactions. Thus, students must be able to learn how to perform these skills in an integrated manner as the goal of the course is for students to increase their English language proficiency and communicate authentically while students still have almost no opportunities for interactions with native speakers. This is the reason why the professor has chosen to complete this research and why CILT is a necessary teaching strategy for the 33 intermediate students in this college level course at UNAE. This also allows the teacher to use various innovative activities in the class to aid in the English language learning processes.

2. LITERATUREREVIEW

2.1 Content Based Instruction

Content Based Instruction (CBI) in EFL is a methodology that allows skill and content integration to be accessible in the language learning process. According to [Richards \(2006\)](#), CBI is a communicative language process-based approach which promotes communicative competence in language learning. [Oxford \(2001\)](#) explains that when teachers integrate skills such as listening, speaking, writing and reading into the

classroom this allows EFL skill learning to become intertwined with content learning. Oxford (2001) goes on to describe how content-based instruction is used in EFL classrooms throughout the world. Stoller (2002) discusses how the theme-based method, which is part of content-based instruction, has become popular because it can be used in many different contexts and strongly aids in the language learning process, especially since it allows all four skills to be integrated. Oxford (2001) also discusses the various types of content-based methodology. One type is them-based methodology, which has been used in this research where “a wide variety of language skills (are) practiced, always in the service of communicating about the theme” (Oxford, 2001, p. 4).

2.2 Integrating Skills

The integrated skills approach “is based on the concept that in natural, day-to-day experience, oral and written languages are not kept separate and isolated from one another” (Su, 2007, p. 29). According to Oxford (2001), integrating skills allows students to interact in a more authentic or natural form in the classroom. This approach gives students the opportunity to practice English in the classroom mimicking how natural interaction occurs. Oxford (2001) concludes that this learning approach therefore motivates student learning in the classroom. Aydođan and Akbarov (2014) reiterate this point by explaining how EFL students need to learn in an integrated skills classroom to become fluent English speakers and accurate writers as well as able and sufficient readers. If students are not learning in this type of classroom they will not have the tools to authentically communicate in English. Abdrabo (2014) supports this argument by stating that one skill really cannot be properly taught or learned without interaction with the other skills. He goes onto explain that the integrated skills approach not only supports EFL learning, but if not utilized, it can make learning more difficult for students learning a foreign language. He further says that when skills are segregated in the classroom this decreases communication and does not allow for an authentic learning environment. The teacher of this course therefore chose this approach since her students did not get authentic practice outside of the classroom. Students tend to only have contact with English in the EFL classroom and sometimes while listening to music or watching television programs in English. The teacher found this approach allows for students to be able to practice EFL in the most realistic form possible in a non-English speaking country where English is rarely used outside of an academic setting.

Su (2007) finds another positive aspect of the skills-integrated approach, which is making students to become more active learners in the classroom. Through authentic activities students such as the ones involved in this research become more interested in the topics and more involved in the EFL classes. Abdrabo (2014) and Su (2007) believe that segregating the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in the classroom is an old way of teaching, while integrating skills is the future and puts emphasis on the fundamentals of the communicative learning theory, which increases the utility of this methodology in an EFL classroom. Also, Akram and Malik (2010) clearly state that without the integration of the four main skills in a foreign language classroom, authentic communication could not be attained. This is very important because communication has become an integral part of language proficiency in EFL classrooms.

2.3 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Richards (2006) explains that the CLT approach has many different layers and definitions, but ultimately is a set of guidelines about learning a language, types of activities used in the classroom, teaching outcomes, and the roles of the students and teachers. CLT promotes the use of activities utilizing all four skills within the classroom, such as the activities used in the research for this paper. Examples of the activities utilized in this investigation that Richards (2006) mentions are pair and group work, authentic role plays and in class activities which connect to the reality of students' interests and needs. By integrating the four skills together, the researcher was following the core idea of CLT which states, "communication is a holistic process that often calls upon the use of several language skills or modalities" (Richards, 2006, p. 22). However, Nassaji and Fotos (2011) have found that CLT must also incorporate teaching-learning grammar into the classroom for the most effective learning to occur. These authors explain that the combination of grammar instruction in CLT can create an effective learning environment in the classroom. This is what the research of this paper aims at proving. When the grammar focused activities mentioned in this paper are applied using communicative instruction methodology, students were able to comprehend and excel in the EFL learning processes and to feel more motivated to further their learning.

Majd (2014) finds that not only did communicative teaching strategies aid in increasing communicative competence in the EFL students but they also increased student motivation and interest in language learning. This study also found that the more comfortable students felt, the more fluent they became with the use of the communicative teaching techniques. Mesgarshahr and Abdollahzadeh (2014) discuss how students need to be given communicative strategies if they are going to be comfortable and motivated to speak. They have explained that without these strategies, which are similar to those studied in this paper, students may learn how to communicate, but be unable to do so in a natural setting. That is one of the reasons why the professor of these participants believed in using the communicative content-based strategies in class, as he believed it would not only improve EFL learning, but would also improve actual communication competence in real life situations.

2.4 Teaching Strategies

This research was subject to various strategies to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing, while utilizing a communicative teaching approach and a content-based methodology. The strategies mentioned by the author are role plays, jigsaw reading, pair and group work activities and use of information technology. Maleki (2010) explains that the various types of communication activities mentioned in this research need to be incorporated into a language classroom for communication competence to be achieved. However, he points out that success with these communication strategies depends a lot on the ability of the teacher to harness motivational input throughout the language course. Another important point, which was brought up in the study by Intarapanich (2013) of strategies used by EFL teachers in Laos, is that teachers tend to choose the strategies that best work in their environment and for the specific needs of their students. That is one of

the reasons the professor of this course chose CLT and CBL to teach the group of participants in this study. The activities selected allowed the students to be able to practice English in the classroom in a similar way that they would do in a natural setting. This was important for this specific EFL course because the students had little or no access to real English language practice outside of the classroom.

3. METHODS

This investigation was a part of classroom action research (CAR). The research followed a mixed methods approach using guided pre- and post-questionnaires, a pre-test and a post-test and teacher-student observations. The pre-questionnaire provided the necessary information to justify the study. The pre-test and post-test provided insights into how the activities used by the teacher aided in increasing the knowledge of the students over the two and a half week learning period of the study. The post-questionnaire explicitly checked how each activity used aided in the learning processes of the students.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Strategies Used

Many different strategies were used throughout this unit. These activities were focused on practicing and learning specific skills, but through this activity all the other important EFL skills were incorporated. The students explained that the most liked activities that they enjoyed and learned most from in class were those activities done in pairs or in groups such as listening activities, a role play, reading articles, and the use of songs. The aforementioned activities were activities completed in the class that integrated all four English language learning skills into each activity and were based on CLT and CBL. Some examples of these activities included the creation of a radio talk show, a role play about past experiences and reading an article based on the previously learned content and vocabulary.

4.1.1 The Radio Show

The radio show followed CLT and incorporated reading, listening, speaking and writing into the activity. Students first read and listened to an example of a talk show that utilized vocabulary, content and grammar that they had previously learned. The students then reviewed any vocabulary and grammar that they did not know in the class with their teacher. The students then worked autonomously to write a script, to practice the script together and to record the script. When each of the students had completed their recording, the class listened to each recording for pronunciation, intonation and use of content, grammar and vocabulary that was being practiced in the unit. These recordings were also used as an in-class assessment of the students listening and speaking skills.

4.1.2 Role Play

The in-class role plays also incorporated writing, listening, speaking and reading. Students were given a specific topic about a personal past experience following CBL. This topic was discussed as a large group using the present perfect and past simple. Students then used a conversation in the textbook as a guide to create a role play. Students worked in pairs to write a conversation, read and practice it, then act out the conversation in front of their groups. Each group then chose the best role play in their group and those two-people acted out their conversation in front of the entire class. The teacher collected the written dialogues to assess the students writing skills and observed the dialogues of the student pairs as they were acting them out to assess their speaking skills in class.

4.1.3 Reading

Five different readings were given out, which were specifically about the topics that they had been discussing throughout the unit. These students were then given specific strategies to learn how to read for comprehension. These included skimming and summarizing a specific section of the reading then completing a jigsaw activity to promote broader reading comprehension. The students shared the information that they read with their group through jigsaw reading. Each person in the group shared the different parts of the reading and they took notes so everyone could understand the whole reading. Finally, each student wrote a summary of their reading and shared it with the class. To assess students understanding the teacher randomly asked other group questions about what their classmates had just discussed to check the overall students' comprehension of the different readings. Although the students focused on reading, they also practiced listening, writing and speaking. This activity incorporated all four skills following the CLT and CBL approaches.

4.1.4 Listening to a Song

The students listened to a song after first being introduced to the song Andit's Title. The students were then given a worksheet to fill in the blanks to review the grammar. First, they reviewed the lyrics and as a class reviewed any unfamiliar vocabulary. The students then listened to the song twice and filled in blanks on a questionnaire. They reviewed the song line by line using a video projector to project the lyrics in front of the class allowing the students to check their answers. The students were then broken into groups and given different sections of the song to sing. They were given a specific time to practice their section of the song and then the class reintegrated and sang the whole song together. While this activity was based on listening the students also practiced their reading, writing content and speaking or singing skills.

4.1.5 Assessment

Throughout all the activities the professor utilized various informal evaluation tools. These included student group and pair observations, peer assessments and independent

evaluations. At the end of the two-and-a-half-week period, the teacher gave the students a formal assessment to find out what they had learned through a written test that included listening, reading and writing plus an oral presentation. This was to get a better understanding of the students' ability to use the grammar and vocabulary learnt through the communicative activities and integrated skills strategies.

4.2 Tests

An intermediate level pre-evaluation test was given at the beginning of the two-and-a-half-week session to evaluate the students' pre-knowledge and understanding of the present perfect. It showed that only 12% of the class scored more than 70% for their overall skill and ability when using the present perfect at the beginning of the course. This showed that most of the students needed to learn and reinforce reading, writing, listening and speaking skills when using the present perfect. This information supported the necessity for the teacher to use a strategy that integrates skills when teaching this topic to the participating students.

Table 1. Pre-test in all four skills for the use of the present perfect.

No	Pre skill evaluation for present perfect	n out of 33	% with 70% and over	n	% with 69% or lower
1.	Speaking	5	15	28	85
2.	Listening	5	18	27	82
3.	Reading	8	24	25	76
4.	Writing	8	24	25	76
5.	Total grade	4	12	29	88

Table 2. Post-test of all four skills for present perfect.

No	Post-test skill evaluation for present perfect	n out of 33	% with 70% or more	n	% with 69% or less
1.	Speaking	29	88	4	12
2.	Listening	25	76	8	24
3.	Reading	29	88	4	12
4.	Writing	27	82	6	18
5.	Total score	30	91	3	9

An intermediate level post-evaluation test was given at the end of the two and a half week session to re-evaluate the students' knowledge and understanding of the present perfect. It showed good results for the use of communicative teaching through integrating skills to teach reading, writing, listening and speaking when using the present perfect. The results of the final evaluation from the course showed that 91% of the students were now proficient in all four skills when using the present perfect compared with 12% before.

The post class questionnaire was about the students' prior and post knowledge of the present perfect. Table 3 gives the basis or reasoning for studying and teaching the present perfect. It shows most students did not have prior knowledge of this grammar point and therefore needed to learn how to use it in all four skills. Table 3 also shows that more than

96% of all the students believe they gained a better understanding of the present perfect through the professors teaching style, strategies, and methods.

Table 3. Questionnaire asking about student’s prior knowledge and post knowledge about the present perfect.

<i>No</i>	<i>Yes/No post class questions</i>	<i>n out of 33</i>	<i>% who said yes</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>% who said no</i>
1.	Have you learned the present perfect before?	26	79	7	21
2.	Have you gained a better understanding of the present perfect through the professor’s teaching style?	32	97	1	3
3.	Total	33	100	33	100

The post-test questionnaire was about the opinions of the students on the strategies and activities that best improved their use of the present-perfect with the various EFL skills. Table 4 shows their opinions about what types of activities improved their learning for the different skills practiced in class. These activities were all based on teaching strategies and methods incorporated into the integrated skill learning.

Table 4. Students’ opinions about the strategies and activities used in class.

<i>No</i>	<i>Activities that aided most in improvement</i>	<i>n of times an activity or strategy was chosen</i>	<i>% of students who chose this answer</i>
1.	Group or pair activities	20	61
2.	Speaking activities	10	30
3.	Songs or listening activities	11	33
4.	Writing experiences activities	16	48
5.	Reading articles	10	30
6.	Fill in the blanks	3	9
7.	Individual work	10	30
8.	None of the above	0	0

5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be seen through the various activities and formal assessments that the students increased their knowledge about the present-perfect and improved their listening, reading, writing, speaking and content skills over the two and half week program. The strategies used by the teacher enabled the students to improve overall in all four skills by following the CBL and CLT approaches. Through the communicative teaching strategies and skill integrating activities the students were also able to learn and practice all EFL skills in an authentic manner. To support this research, [Sari \(2016\)](#) found that authentic materials supported learning in the classroom. When teachers used this type of material the students increased their language learning. The results also showed that the students also enjoyed the communicative activities in groups and learning about content and grammar through the integration of skills. The students’ agreed that they tended to improve their knowledge and English abilities when these strategies were utilized in class. As suggested by [Sevy \(2016\)](#), group work can increase students sense of authenticity since they are more relaxed

when working in a group setting. Sevy (2016) also explains that role play activities promote authentic learning in the classroom, because the students can act out real-life conversations and situations in the L2 language. For these reasons and for the successful outcome of the study program, it can be understood why this model of approach and strategies were chosen by the EFL teacher to conduct this CAR research in the classroom.

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[Received 23 January 2018; revised 02 April 2018; accepted 30 April 2018]

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