10 Skills for communication

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Key words

Skills and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Integrated approach to skills

Receptive skills

Productive skills

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

How did the introduction of the centralised *Matura* in Austria influence the way skills are taught?

What are the arguments for taking an integrated approach to teaching skills?

What should teachers consider when teaching receptive skills?

What should teachers consider when teaching productive skills?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

The year 2004 was a turning point in the development of the Austrian foreign language curriculum because it was linked to the Common European Framework of Reference (see chapter 5 in this volume). This prompted a shift from a more grammar- and knowledge-based curriculum to one that had a stronger focus on competences and communication (see Spöttl et al., 2016). Although this shift had already begun much earlier with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (see chapter 1 in this volume), linking the curriculum to the CEFR placed an even stronger emphasis on the importance of skills required for communication by explicitly stating what learners should be able to do at various stages of language learning. The centralised *Matura,* the new secondary school leaving exam introduced in 2015/16, was also in line with this approach, which arguably had a washback effect on how English was taught in the language classroom as teachers adapted their way of teaching to better prepare their learners for taking the exam. In practice this meant that teachers focused more on skills work. Naturally, skills had always been a part of language teaching but with the introduction of the new curriculum and *Matura* they gained greater importance.

Skills are traditionally categorized as receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Other more general skills (e.g., critical

thinking) are also relevant and are reflected in the transversal principles of the Austrian curriculum, and mediation is now included in the CEFR. The *AHS Matura* tests the four central skills; the *BHS Matura* covers these four skills and mediation as well. The focus of this chapter will be on the four central skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. It is important to remember that skills work is not only about preparing for the *Matura;* skills work is essential from the beginning of language learning because learners can only learn a skill if they practice it.

In real life, we do not use language skills in isolation, and this should be reflected in the way skills are practiced in the language classroom. While teachers often need to focus on one individual skill for practical purposes, ideally, best practice should consist of a more integrated approach to language skills (e.g., reading a letter and then responding to it in writing). In this chapter, we will first look at each skill individually before providing examples of an integrated approach (see Practical Applications at the end of this chapter).

Receptive Skills

Reading

Reading is a communicative act between the writer of a given text and whoever may read it – be it the intended audience or anyone who may pick up the text out of interest or for any other reason. This means that the purpose of a written text is to convey a writer's message, which, in turn, is decoded by the reader. Naturally, it is unclear whether a reader actually comprehends the intended message of a given text, but this model of reading shows that the skill involves communication between the writer and the reader and highlights the fact that reading entails more than just decoding the words in a given text.

In fact, reading is a skill that requires learners to interact with a text like in a conversation with another person, except for the fact that the text cannot answer back. Nuttall (1996) describes this process as "active interrogation of a text", thus highlighting two very important aspects involved in the skill of reading: the fact that it is an active process and that it requires learners to question a text in order to understand the writer's message as best as possible (p. 10).

Highlighting the communicative purpose of reading is one way that teachers can help to develop their learners' reading skills, thus placing the focus more on meaning and not the individual words in front of them. However, in most cases, this

probably will not be enough. This means that, like with other language skills, teachers need to practice this skill with their learners both inside and outside of the classroom by focusing on how people read and the subskills that can facilitate reading.

When reading a text two processes are being employed: top-down processing and bottom-up processing (Nuttall, 1996). Top-down processing requires readers to activate schemata (prior knowledge and experience) which they use to make sense of the text and to construct meaning. In contrast, bottom-up processing is often used by readers to deal more closely with the written word if certain passages are not clear and readers want to acquire the full meaning of a text. During the reading process, readers often move back and forth between both processes employing whichever approach facilitates reading and acquiring as much of the writer's message as possible.

For learners who are avid readers, the processes above most probably are used unconsciously and they do not require much assistance in reading and acquiring the writer's message. However, for learners who are more reluctant readers, teachers may need to call their attention to the different ways of reading (skimming, scanning, reading for gist, reading for detail) and actively practice them in class through intensive reading under the teacher's guidance. By focusing on the different ways of reading for different purposes, teachers can raise learners' awareness about why they are reading and what information they actually want to obtain from the given text. Such an approach to reading also moves away from seeing the skill as merely a way to test learners' comprehension as it requires them to engage with a text more purposefully.

Intensive reading in class also involves working on sub-skills such as getting learners to call on previous knowledge about the subject of the text or the text type, employing prediction, working on word-attacking strategies and paying attention to signposting. Learners should also have the opportunity to read different types of texts in order to heighten awareness of different ways of reading and to engage with texts that are slightly more challenging lexically in order to maximize learning. In an intensive reading lesson plan, these skills can be practiced by starting with a pre-reading activity (e.g., arousing learners' interest in the topic & introducing key words), providing a while-reading activity (e.g., skimming for gist & guessing the meaning of words from context) and concluding with a post-reading activity (e.g., focusing on new vocabulary & transferring language work to a speaking or writing task).

In addition to intensive reading, teachers should also include extensive reading in their syllabus. This type of reading is done outside of class for learners' enjoyment

and involves longer texts (e.g., graded readers, novels, longer articles), which should be at their language level or slightly below. The reason for employing texts which are less challenging linguistically is because the goal of extensive reading is "to increase reading fluency" and the pleasure of reading in general (Hadfield & Hadfield, 2008, p. 96). Possible activities to facilitate this include keeping a reading journal, doing book presentations in class or online and running reading circles.

Listening

The skill of listening may pose more of a challenge for learners than teachers are often aware of (Paran, 2012). One reason for this is that while spoken language might be well-structured like a written text, in many situations this is not the case. In a spoken conversation, for example, speakers may leave out words, include irrelevant information or backtrack in order to add information they left out in mid-sentence. They may interrupt each other, speak over their partner and use hesitation all within one exchange (Hadfield & Hadfield, 2008). Another reason learners may struggle is because, in contrast to a written text, a spoken text disappears after being uttered, leaving learners with nothing more than their memory to rely on.

All of these factors can contribute to listening activities being stressful situations for learners of a foreign language. Yet listening is a very important skill because without it, learners will struggle in communicative situations such as when skyping, conducting telephone conversations and watching a movie. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide their learners with skills and strategies that can help facilitate their listening and boost their confidence along the way.

Like with reading, top-down and bottom-up processes are used while listening. Top-down refers to listening for the overall message while bottom-up means understanding single words in order to comprehend the spoken text. For learners, "the key to success" is being able to grasp the overall meaning of what they are listening to as well as fill in the gaps where needed (Harmer, 2015, p. 337). This can be particularly difficult for language learners at lower levels who often concentrate on single words and the individual sounds while listening, thus restricting them from understanding the general message.

Teachers can work on both of these processes by practicing intensive listening in their classrooms. For example, top-down listening can be facilitated by asking learners to make predictions about what they expect to hear. This may not only put learners at ease as they have time to think about the listening task but also build up learners' confidence when they realize that they have pre-knowledge which can help them during the listening process (Harmer, 2015). Other possible approaches

include asking learners to listen for gist by posing a general question before doing the listening task so that they know what they should pay particular attention to.

Concerning bottom-up listening, teachers can require learners to listen for specific information which promotes focused listening. In such lessons, learners should be given the questions before listening to the text so that they know what they should concentrate on and have time to activate schemata. Dictation can also be used in which teachers dictate sentences that include certain aspects of speech, with the aim of raising learners' awareness. This activity requires learners to write down everything they hear while allowing teachers to focus on features of spoken language, like linking of words (Harmer, 2015).

By focusing on the different aspects of listening, teachers do not only contribute to developing learners' confidence but also move away from approaching the skill of listening as merely a way to test learners' comprehension. After all, being able to employ different ways of listening prepares learners for real-life situations. As the ultimate goal of CLT is to prepare learners for foreign language use outside of the classroom, teachers should also provide opportunities to listen to a wide variety of recorded materials from podcasts to films that cover different situations, levels of formality and accents. In the case of film, teachers may also want to consider the type of input: audio, visual, both audio and visual, subtitles etc. By including visual input, teachers can also ask learners to consider the role non-verbal features such as gestures, facial expressions and eye contact and the influence they have on listening.

Like with reading, an intensive listening lesson usually includes three stages: pre-listening (e.g., introducing the topic, making predictions, presenting comprehension questions), while-listening, which can include multiple repetitions (e.g., listening for gist, specific information, identifying words in connected speech), and post-listening (e.g., looking at the transcript and detecting new vocabulary, including a speaking or writing task). By spending class time on practicing listening skills, teachers also send the message that this skill is not merely an activity that should be used to fill in the last ten minutes of a lesson when learners are tired, and their level of concentration is waning.

Finally, teachers can encourage learners to work on extensive listening outside of class. Like extensive reading, this is done for pleasure and can include anything that learners like to listen to in their free time (e.g., music, YouTube videos, films). As follow-up activities, learners can present their favourite song lyrics in class, make their own music video or write a review of a film, just to name a few options. In the end, the more contact learners have with listening, the more confident they

will be when encountering spoken texts for the first time or in stressful situations like at the *Matura*.

Productive Skills

Writing

The way writing is taught in Austrian classrooms has been strongly influenced by the standardised *Matura* exam, even at lower levels. For example, a handbook of advice for teachers on building up their learners' writing skills in lower secondary makes frequent reference to the *Matura* as the ultimate goal of writing instruction (Horak et al., 2012).

For the writing part of the *Matura*, learners have to produce texts that fulfil the requirements of specific text types whose characteristics are clearly defined (genre writing). Genre writing requires learners to have knowledge of the conventions of the genre they are writing in (e.g., blog post, opinion essay). They have to write in an appropriate style and register (formal/informal) and consider the intended reader of a given text type (even though in reality, most texts will only be read by their teacher). All of this makes genre writing highly complex, and the teacher's support is crucial for learners' success.

When a new text type is introduced, the teacher cannot assume that learners are familiar with it. Learners first have to develop an awareness of the genre they have to write in, usually by studying successful examples of the text type that illustrate its various characteristics and stylistic features. When they produce their own texts, they need detailed feedback from their teacher on language (vocabulary, grammar), but especially on content, structure and register.

This central role of feedback (see chapter 8 in this volume) is why genre writing lends itself to a process writing approach, even though genre writing works towards a clearly defined end product - a successful example of a specific text type. Learners should be encouraged to focus on the process of writing itself, not just the finished product. They should always produce and edit several drafts of a text based on their teachers' feedback at each stage of the process before they arrive at a finished product.

It can be easier to focus on the process of writing if it is brought into the classroom itself as a cooperative activity. Traditionally, writing tasks are set as homework. This means that learners have to produce a text by themselves, based on the information they received in class, without the opportunity to consult their peers or their

teacher when questions arise. Writing in the classroom generates more ideas, provides opportunities for discussions that lead to a deeper understanding of text types and allows learners to benefit from their peers' feedback on their writing. Tools such as shared files, wikis and learning platforms can facilitate cooperative writing (see chapter 7 in this volume).

A process writing approach is not exclusive to genre writing, however. Creative writing, e.g., when learners produce poems, fairy tales and stories, works best when there is an audience learners can share the finished texts with, and peer reviewing and other aspects of cooperative writing can easily be adapted to suit such creative writing tasks.

While creative writing is, at first glance, not related to the type of writing tasks learners will eventually have to deal with at the *Matura*, it would be a mistake to neglect it. Learners who are insecure and unenthusiastic about their writing have to work on developing a "writing habit" before they can tackle complex writing tasks (Harmer, 2015, p. 367). One way of achieving this is by getting them to cooperate on enjoyable, low-stakes tasks that are properly scaffolded by, for example, providing a simplified version of a task and then gradually increasing the complexity, describing or illustrating a task in various ways to ensure understanding or giving learners a model example.

Music or pictures can be used to generate ideas, and writing frames and patterns can give reluctant writers some orientation in the writing process. If learners are used to writing as a normal part of their English lessons from lower levels onwards, they will be better equipped to tackle more demanding genres and tasks later on.

Speaking

Speaking is likely to be seen as the most important skill by the majority of learners (Ur, 2012). When they use English outside the classroom, this often takes the form of conversations in English with people who do not speak the learners' first language. This also means that learners' command of spoken English is the most visible aspect of their language competence and the one they will most likely be judged on in 'real life'. This adds to the perceived importance of this skill for both learners and teachers.

Teachers and learners would probably agree that the goal of teaching speaking is for learners to become fluent speakers of English, and accordingly, many typical activities in a communicative English classroom are designed to improve learners' fluency (e.g., role plays). This aligns with the principles of CLT. While CLT means

different things to different people, it is generally understood to place considerable emphasis on authentic communication and to privilege meaning - i.e., learners getting their point across - over accuracy (Harmer, 2015).

This approach has strongly influenced the way speaking is taught. The first concern of teachers is often to get learners to overcome their shyness about speaking a foreign language and 'getting them to talk', i.e., participate actively in communication tasks. Pair work and group work activities are a good way of easing shy learners into speaking as such learners often find it easier to speak to their peers than to answer the teacher in front of the whole class. When learners do speak in front of the whole group, teachers are careful to correct them in a way that does not put them on the spot and discourage them from speaking up in class in the future.

In order to motivate learners to speak, it is obviously important to give them something to speak about that they find interesting. Many teachers therefore supplement their coursebooks with materials that reflect the interests of their learners, and the learners are encouraged to express their opinions on current topics and discuss issues they care about (see chapter 6 in this volume). In such cases, teachers tend to largely disregard errors of form as long as the learners manage to make themselves understood and to get their point across, putting the focus squarely on fluency rather than accuracy.

While it is doubtlessly important to encourage learners to express themselves freely and fluently from early on in their careers, merely getting one's point across should not be the ultimate goal of advanced language instruction. The CEFR descriptors for speaking at B1 level refer to 'enough language to get by'. However, at the B2 level speakers are described as showing 'a relatively high degree of grammatical control' and using 'some complex sentence forms'. Learners have to be challenged and supported if they are to reach this higher level and not get stuck on the ‘intermediate plateau’. This means teachers should also increasingly take accuracy into consideration when they plan speaking activities for more advanced learners.

Of course, speaking tasks should always be designed with clear language objectives in mind. However, while this is done intuitively at lower levels of proficiency, where the teacher is always very conscious of the limitations of what the learners can do with language, setting language objectives requires more conscious planning at higher levels. Once the learners can 'get by' in English to a degree that allows them to discuss most general topics with the language at their disposal, speaking tasks should focus on specific aspects of grammar or vocabulary so that the learners can expand their repertoire of structures and patterns, resulting in greater complexity in their production.

One area in particular that is worth thinking about in this context is register. Due to the dominance of English in popular culture, learners often pick up non-standard phrases and expressions that are not appropriate in more formal settings (such as, for example, an oral exam in front of a panel of examiners like the *Matura*). It is important to make learners aware of different registers without discouraging them from engaging with and learning from the English they encounter outside the classroom. If they are given the tools to develop their language awareness, this can form the basis for independent language learning beyond their school career (see chapter 2 in this volume).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that teachers need to take into account a number of pedagogical considerations when working on developing their language learners' skills, while always keeping the communicative purpose in mind. For the sake of clarity, each skill was discussed individually; however, skills should be integrated when taught in the language classroom, which the tasks in the practical applications section aim to show.

Practical Applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will read for meaning; learners will summarize findings orally; learners will synthesize findings in a written report

Activity: report writing

Rationale: to reflect real-life language use

Pre-knowledge: style and layout of a written report as required by the *Matura*

Level: CEFR B1+ and above

Procedure

1. The teacher prepares a questionnaire on a topic of interest to learners. This can consist of basic yes/no questions or multiple-choice responses.

2. Learners read the questionnaire and fill it in.

3. The teacher collects all of the questionnaires and cuts them up into separate individual questions.

4. The teacher distributes individual questions to small groups of learners so that each group must evaluate the responses to one question.

5. Learners evaluate the individual question assigned to them.

6. In their small groups, learners present the results of their evaluation to the whole class.

7. The teacher or a learner collects the results on the board, making them visible for the whole class.

8. In their small groups, learners transfer the results of the questionnaire into a collaborative written report.

9. Written reports are posted on a learning platform for the whole class to read.

10. Every learner must read one report by another group and post a comment about whether it conforms to the requirements of the text type.

11. In the next class, the teacher gives feedback on the group reports and addresses any issues and questions that may have arisen from the peer feedback.

Example 2

Goal: learners will practice making predictions; learners will listen for a purpose; learners will learn to retell a story

Activity: listening to a story

Rationale: to practice listening for gist and details

Pre-knowledge: basic structure of a narrative text

Level: CEFR A2 and above

Procedure

1. The teacher provides learners with key words or pictures from the story and asks learners to make predictions about the story based on them.

2. The teacher plays the audio recording of the story and learners listen in order to see if their predictions were correct.

3. In pairs, learners try to reconstruct the story, using key words or pictures if needed.

4. The teacher elicits stories from learners and asks the class to fill in any information that may be missing.

5. The teacher plays the audio again and learners read the transcript of the story.

6. Learners re-tell the story in pairs.

7. In small groups learners prepare to act out the short story.

8. Learners act out and videotape their version of the short story and present it to the class.

This activity could also be done with a scene in a play or movie. After the lead-in prediction activity, learners listen to the scene without viewing the play or movie. Once learners have performed their version of the scene, the teacher can show the original and learners can compare their understanding with it.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Look at a recent lesson plan and check to what extent skills are taught in an integrated fashion.

2. Design your own lesson plan in which you integrate skills for a real-life context.

3. What are the reasons for working only on one skill with learners / for integrating skills?

4. Are there any skills that you find particularly difficult to integrate into classroom teaching? Why and what could you do about it?

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Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Suggestions for further reading

Field, J. (2009). *Listening in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

This book goes beyond viewing listening for comprehensive purposes and considers the processes that are involved. Practical examples are provided for classroom use.

Hyland, K. (2016). *Teaching and Researching Writing*. Routledge.

This book provides an overview of current theories and research on writing and is also a guide to good practice that provides many specific examples of writing instruction.

Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. Macmillan Heinemann English Language Teaching.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of reading skills and strategies that teachers should consider when teaching the skill of reading as well as ways they can integrate reading into their lesson planning and assess it.

Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking*. Pearson Longman.

This book gives a theoretical introduction to spoken language production and provides suggestions for practical ways speaking can be integrated into the language classroom, as well as a task file.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. to **2.** Your answers to these reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience and context. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on integrating skills in your teaching.

3. Reasons for working only on one skill: this is usually prompted by practical considerations, e.g., skills are often tested separately (for example, at the *Matura*) and learners have to be prepared for those specific test formats; the teacher may notice that a particular group of learners struggle with one specific skill or subskill.

Reasons for integrating skills: skills are not used in isolation in real life and classroom practice should reflect this.

4. This question will be answered differently by different teachers, but many teachers may feel that reading and writing are more difficult to integrate. With listening and speaking, it is possible to involve the whole class, while reading and writing are

more often done individually. This can feel like a waste of class time in the context of CLT. It may be helpful to see reading and writing as acts of communication and design activities that allow learners to read and write collaboratively.