Tapping the Potential of Skill Integration as a Conduit for Communicative Language Teaching

Shu-hua Wu[1] & Sulaiman Alrabah[1]

[1] Language Center, College of Business Studies, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait

Correspondence: Shu-hua Wu, Language Center, College of Business Studies, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait. E-mail: wu104ohio@yahoo.com.tw

Abstract

The purpose of this classroom-based study was to discover the kinds of skill integration tasks that were employed by English teachers in Kuwait and to measure their attitudes toward implementing the skill integration technique in their classrooms. Data collection involved recording 25 hours of classroom-based observations, conducting interviews with the same group of teachers, and distributing a survey to further explore the teachers' attitudes toward the skill integration technique. Data analysis involved categorizing skill integration tasks, analyzing the interview data, and counting the means and standard deviations of the survey data. Findings indicated that the participating teachers performed a wide range of transactional and interactional tasks that involved the simultaneous integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in their classrooms. The findings also revealed that even though the skill integration technique was adopted by most of the English teachers, they were ambivalent toward its implementation in their classrooms. This was partly due to the negative washback effect of traditional English tests that measure students' accurate application of grammar rules but not their fluency and ability to use the L2 as a tool for communication. Implications for L2 pedagogy were drawn regarding the need for teachers to expose students of all proficiency levels to both transactional and interactional tasks in the classroom. To counter the negative washback effect of conventional discrete-point tests, English teachers were encouraged to develop communicative tests that involve skill integration and emphasize the development of the four language skills in their daily classroom activities.

Keywords: classroom-based research, communicative language teaching, interactional tasks, skill integration, task-based language teaching, transactional tasks, washback effect

1. Introduction

While modern teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Canale, 1983; Savignon, 2001; Richards, 2005), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003; D. Willis & J. Willis, 2007), and Content-Based Instruction (CBI) (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010) teach foreign languages by re-creating typical communication experiences in the classroom so learners can be trained to eventually "use" the foreign language as a tool for communication, traditional language teaching methods such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) taught language through memorization, rote learning, drills, and repetition, and aimed to teach learners to "know" the linguistic rules of the foreign language. Modern language teaching methods are based on the belief that as English language learners are exposed to authentic language within classroom activities that challenge them to interact by using English, their overall communicative abilities will be increased to the extent that they will fluently use the language they learned in real communication situations. The integrated skills technique or the integration of the four communication skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in classroom tasks and activities was seen by several researchers (e.g., Oxford, 2001; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013) as a crucial means for developing learners' overall communicative ability in the language classroom. Proponents of the communicatively-oriented integrated skills technique argue that since the language learner utilizes different skills in different combinations in real communication situations, English teachers need to simulate these combinations in the classroom to develop their students' overall communicative ability in English. In general, this line of inquiry makes it clear that integrated skills teaching is helpful in developing a learner's overall communication skills in the L2. Thus, the importance of skill integration as a language teaching technique has been abundantly established in the profession.

However, Brown (2007) indicated that many English teachers around the world still continue to teach each of the four language skills separately, one at a time, with little recognition given to the need for integrating these skills in classroom activities. Several researchers in the Arab world (e.g., Aljumah, 2011; Mekheimer & Aldosari, 2013; Shaaban, 2013) have, moreover, reported a similar tendency among English teachers in Arab EFL settings toward more skill separation and less skill integration in their classrooms. Teaching the skills separately can be driven by a teacher's belief that it is more practical to teach the skills one at a time than to integrate them in order to cope with the demands of the textbook or the teacher's guide. This tendency, however, reveals a compartmentalized view to language and language teaching because it gives the learner an unrealistic idea of authentic language use in day-to-day communication.

Due to the fact that in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, the integrated skills technique has become a recognized feature of CLT, TBLT, and CBI, there is a need, therefore, for conducting research on this technique in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings including the countries of the Arab world in order to discover why it has not yet been fully implemented in English teachers' classrooms. This research needs to first explore the extent to which this technique has been utilized by English teachers, and to describe the teaching tasks English teachers have developed while implementing it into their daily lesson plans. A second concern would be to measure the English teachers' attitudes toward employing the integrated skills technique in their classrooms.

The purpose of the study was, therefore, two-fold: (1) to describe the types of skill integration tasks that are being taught in the Kuwaiti English classroom, and (2) to explore the attitudes of English teachers in Kuwait toward skill integration within their classrooms. This classroom-based study sought to enrich our understanding of skill integration in the Kuwaiti English classroom by searching for answers to the following research questions:

1) What were the types of teaching tasks that employed skill integration in the English classroom in Kuwait?

2) What were the English teachers' attitudes toward employing skill integration tasks in their classrooms?

2. Review of the Literature

This review first introduces skill integration as a teaching technique that aims to fulfill the objectives of TBLT and CLT. The review further explores the reasons behind the lack of the implementation of the skill integration technique in several countries of the Arab world. This was done by taking into account the negative impact of the systemic curricular constraints and the washback effect of traditional English tests that were found to be detrimental to the skill integration technique. The review concludes with a call for a research study that explores the implementation of the integrated skills technique in the English classroom in Kuwait.

2.1 The Skill Integration Technique

Anthony (1963), Brown (2007), and Richards and Rogers (2014) viewed approach, method, and technique as points along a continuum from the theoretical (approach) in which basic beliefs about language and learning are considered, to design (method) in which a practical plan for teaching (or learning) a language is considered, to the details (technique) where the actual learning activity takes place. Techniques must be consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well. A language learning technique is an explicit procedure used to accomplish a particular learning objective or a set of objectives. The skill integration technique is best seen as an implementation of TBLT. It consists of activities which actually take place in the classroom to meet the objectives of CLT. Richards and Schmidt (2013) introduced skill integration as the teaching of the language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in conjunction with each other. Because opportunities for using language for meaningful communication were limited in the classroom, there was a need for integrated communicative activities that involved authentic interactions to enable students to use the language for purposeful communication. Therefore, the need for language teaching activities in the classroom led to the evolution of TBLT. Exercises for groups or pairs of learners typically combined listening and speaking, reading and speaking, or reading, writing, and speaking. Such integrated skills activities, which are also called tasks, include for example, listening to language tapes, playing games, working on information gap tasks, and problem-solving tasks. These tasks require learners to engage in interaction because they can only be carried out when the participants share and discuss, or read and exchange information.

A useful way to think about the communicative potential of tasks is to treat them as "transactional" and "interactional" tasks (Brown & Yule, 1983; Brown, 2007; McDonough et al., 2013). While a transactional task contains speech conveyed by one participant to another participant, an interactional task contains an exchange of spoken information between two participants. This distinction is useful to English teachers who plan to introduce different task types within one lesson. Hinkel (2006) indicated that task-based teaching is the most

widely-adopted model of integrated skills language teaching and it is considered the nearest classroom simulation to real-life interactions. The integrated skills teaching technique combines the leaner's receptive skills of listening and reading to provide input for the productive skills of speaking and writing. For example, listening tasks are used as models for speaking interactions, and the reading selections provide models for writing. More advanced integrated skills activities can combine a range of language skills. For example, dialogues and interactions can focus on listening and reading skills to facilitate both speaking and writing skills. Generally speaking, activities used in the integrated skills teaching technique have the primary learning objective of introducing the language features needed for communication and used in the context of communication in real situations. The integrated skills technique, therefore, embodies the full spirit of the communicative approach with the aim of producing learners with high communication abilities in English.

It would be no surprise then to find most English teachers in Kuwait to be familiar with the integrated skills technique and work to implement it in classroom activities. But unfortunately and despite the great appeal of the integrated skills technique, several research studies (e.g., Aljumah, 2011; Mekheimer & Aldosari, 2013; Shaaban, 2013) indicated that this technique has not been met with enthusiasm by English language professionals and teachers in EFL settings including several countries in the Arab world. The following sections are devoted, therefore, for what we considered as the biggest stumbling blocks facing the implementation of the integrated skills technique in Kuwait: (1) systemic curricular constraints as represented in teachers' continued reliance on the separate skills teaching technique, and (2) the negative washback effect of traditional English tests.

2.2 Systemic Curricular Pressures and Teaching Methods

Despite the intentions of the English curriculum designers in Kuwait to incorporate communicative objectives for learners, systemic curricular pressures persist and continue to be a real constraint facing the implementation of integrated skills teaching in English classrooms. The word "systemic" here refers to an entire educational system, as opposed to a particular part of that educational system (Donmoyer, 1995; Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010). Within the established English curriculum and teaching methods in Kuwait and other Arab countries, where the instruction in discrete language skills is highly entrenched in teachers' practices, both teachers and learners have shown resistance to skill integration and preferred teaching and learning the skills separately despite the Ministry of Education's special emphasis on the teaching and learning of English for communication purposes.

It is obvious that the designers of the Kuwaiti English curriculum have encouraged the use of integrated skills teaching to increase student fluency in English. Allen and Iggulden (2002), the authors of the required English textbook series, stated that "it is important to understand that the main thrust of an integrated approach is still communicative, which means it is most important to provide pupils with authentic opportunities for communication and continuous practice to gain fluency" (p. viii). However, in reality, the established technique for teaching English as a foreign language in Kuwait has been, and continues to be, to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening separately. During a typical English class period, class activities focus on teaching reading, writing, vocabulary instruction, phonetic identification, and grammar drills that focus on specific grammar rules. English instruction, in effect, isolates the four language skills from their authentic use in communicative contexts. The English classroom, therefore, tends to be less student-centered with the teacher acting as the ultimate authority in class. Students spend most of class time completing workbooks and drills on grammar and vocabulary in order to improve accuracy, and increase their chances of passing the test. Al-Hajji, Taqi, and Shuqair (2012) suggested that the English classroom in Kuwait is often teacher-centered and emphasizes grammatical over communicative competence. In conclusion, traditional teaching methods continue to exert considerable negative influences on English teachers' attempts to implement the integrated skills teaching technique in their classrooms.

Researchers from the Arab world have cited additional factors that could hamper English language teaching in Arab countries. These factors add to the systemic curricular constraints facing the implementation of skill integration within English classrooms in the Arab world. Largely due to the centralized nature of educational systems in many Arab countries, attempts at educational reform by introducing innovative techniques such as the implementation of integrated skills instruction are routinely constrained by the educational culture and the local traditions of how teaching and learning are to be performed. For example, Mekheimer and Aldosari (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study in which two groups of Saudi university level students were exposed to two different treatments. The experimental group was exposed to the integrated skills treatment and the control group had no particular emphasis on skill integration but was exposed to a traditional syllabus that separated the skills. They found significant gains on student performance in all skills areas for the experimental group over the control group. However, Aljumah (2011) explored some of the constraints facing the implementation of an

integrated approach in a Saudi Arabian English medium university. One of the major obstacles was the students' unwillingness to speak and talk in response to teachers' questions in English. In Lebanon, Shaaban (2013) documented the application of CBI in the Lebanese English classroom. He found a disparity between the purpose of the curriculum and actual classroom application of CBI due to several factors. One factor was the teachers' lack of native-like proficiency. Other factors included the lack of adequate resources and the lack of teachers' professional development programs.

2.3 The Washback Effect of Traditional English Tests

Regular achievement tests like quizzes, mid-terms, and end-of-term final exams continue to exert a negative "washback" effect on the implementation of skill integration in English classrooms in the Arab world. Evaluation and testing have traditionally taken the form of objective testing by using different formats of discrete-point tests. This approach to testing is consistent with the separate skills language teaching technique. Both separate skills teaching and traditional English tests promote the learners' linguistic but not communicative competence in English. Brown and Hudson (2003) defined the washback effect as "the effect of testing on the curriculum that leads to it" (p. 48). Consequently, the washback effect can either be positive or negative on the way in which students are taught. For example, if an English curriculum has a set of communicative objectives, but tests the students by using grammar and linguistic tests, a very strong negative washback effect will occur against the communicative curriculum and its objectives. Even though the goal of integrated skills teaching is to enable learners to communicate using English meaningfully and effectively in different contexts, discrete-point grammar tests continue to undermine these communicative objectives especially when students spread the word about this mismatch. It is undeniable that students will only study whatever it is that will come on the tests. Under such circumstances, when teachers have to prepare students to pass the final exams, the ability to communicate in English in authentic contexts seizes to be a practical objective. Due to the negative washback effect of end-of-term English tests, English teachers in the Arab world re-order their teaching priorities to consist of teaching reading and writing and focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic accuracy as the primary skills to be developed. Especially at times when teachers have to "teach to the test," they do not emphasize the teaching of communication skills and instead teach the linguistic contents of the English discrete-point test. This state of affairs means that, for integrated skills teaching to be successfully implemented, tests at the end of term need to be related to the communicative objectives of the curriculum. At a minimum, there is a need to reconcile the inconsistencies between the objectives of the communicatively-oriented language teaching curriculum and the end of term grammar-oriented English language tests.

Despite the great appeal of the integrated skills technique, it should be noted that its implementation in the EFL classroom has been confronted by two major constraints and practical challenges. First, both teachers and learners have shown resistance to skill integration and preferred teaching the skills separately (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Second, the washback effect of traditional English testing has influenced both teachers and learners in their expectations of the contents of end-of-term tests. In this case, the washback effect has negatively worked against the communicative curriculum and its objectives.

In conclusion, a dialectic interrelationship between these two major constraints seems to be self-sustaining. Traditional tests, on the one hand, perpetuate traditional teaching methods, and traditional methods, on the other hand, provide a strong rationale for the continued use of traditional English tests. There is thus a need for a classroom-based study to empirically describe skill integration tasks in the EFL classroom and to explore English teachers' attitudes toward skill integration in order to measure the receptivity of teachers to implementing this technique in their own classrooms.

3. Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers followed an empirical classroom-based design that emphasized the importance of studying at first-hand what the participating teachers routinely did and said in the English classroom. Data were drawn from the classroom observations of the 25 teachers at the first, second, and third grade levels of English in the primary school. The corpus of recorded classroom observations included 25 hours collected over six months. "Convenience" sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) comprised a total of 25 full-time female English teachers who agreed to participate in the study. They were solicited from five different primary schools for girls in the Capital educational area in Kuwait. Access and entry to the schools were facilitated through the Ministry of Education in Kuwait. Participants' consent forms to partake in the study were obtained through the use of a solicitation letter that explained the purpose of the research and the procedures the participants had to follow in the course of the study. Data were collected from three main sources: (1) a total of 25 hours of audiotape recordings of classroom observations, (2) twenty-five 30-minute audiotape interviews to

further explore skill integration tasks from the recorded data of classroom observations, and (3) a "grounded" survey (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) derived from the classroom observation and interview data was used to measure the teachers' attitudes toward implementing skill integration in their daily teaching and test design.

Data analysis methods included (1) classifying and counting the frequency of use of the teaching tasks that involved skill integration in classroom observations,(2) identifying the common patterns and themes in the interview data to explore and corroborate the teachers' attitudes as reflected on the classroom observations on the use of the skill integration technique, and (3) counting the means and standard deviations of the survey data of the English teachers' attitudes toward the skill integration technique by using the Microsoft Excel Software Program. In analyzing the classroom observations, the researchers followed a functional approach to classroom discourse analysis which divided classroom tasks into transactional and interactional tasks. Transactional language is language which is used to make a transaction and which conveys a specific message. It can be compared with interactional language, which is used to maintain social relationships. The validity of the distinction between interactional language, used to express social relations and personal attitudes, and transactional language, which conveys factual or propositional information and is message-oriented, has been established through numerous studies in the field (e.g. Brown & Yule, 1983; Brown, 2007; McDonough et al., 2013). Transactional, interactional, and mixed transactional/interactional tasks were analyzed in each class.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results indicated that 60% (21 out of a total of 35) of the teaching tasks have adopted skill integration technique in the observed classes. The following discussion focused on the types of skill integration tasks that were identified in the observational data and the teachers' attitudes toward skill integration as related to the curriculum and classroom implementation.

4.1 Types of Skill Integration Tasks

TBLT focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Within this study, tasks varied according to the teaching plan or other factors such as students' needs and the time demands of the lesson. Moreover, data analysis of classroom interactions took into consideration the caveat that the young learners are going through a "silent period" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and are learning through listening to the teacher who acted as a model for the new language they are learning. The silent period occurs before young learners of English are ready to produce oral language and is generally referred to as the "pre-production" stage of language learning. English language learners at this stage are unable or unwilling to communicate orally in the new language.

Table 1. Types of skill integration tasks

Skill Integration Tasks	Function	Task Types
Transactional Tasks	Covey factual information for a transactional purpose.	Matching games Bingo Worksheets Reading stories
Interactional Tasks	Involve information exchange for a communicative purpose.	Questions-and-answers Information gap tasks Role plays
Transactional/Interactional Tasks	Involve rhythms and rhymes to promote a positive attitude toward learning the L2	Songs Chants

Table 1 identified a total of nine skill integration task types that were employed by the teachers in the English classroom. These nine types of skill integration tasks were incorporated into three main categories. First, *transactional tasks* involved the transmission of factual information from the teacher to the students for the purpose of completing the task. In the data of classroom observations collected for this study, transactional tasks were often taught more than interactional tasks. This was probably due to the fact that the students were at the beginning proficiency level. Transactional tasks involved shorter turns, and simpler and more predictable language. Teachers doing transactional tasks reported that they were focused primarily on the appropriate completion of the tasks rather than on the students' accurate use of language forms. This made transactional

tasks especially appropriate for developing target language fluency and student confidence. The four transactional task types that were identified in the data included matching games, bingo, doing worksheets, and reading stories. Second, *interactional tasks* involved an exchange of information between the teacher and students, or between the students among themselves. The three interactional task types that were identified in the data included questions-and-answers, information gap tasks, and role plays. Third, *transactional/interactional tasks* involved an exchange of words between the teacher and students for the performance of a song or chant. These tasks were introduced by teachers to enhance student motivation through fun and entertainment. Teachers used rhythms and rhymes to promote a positive attitude toward learning English. The two transactional/ interactional task types that were identified in the data included songs and chants. The following sections provide further explanations of nine different task types and offer examples from the classroom observation data of the five task types of matching games, bingo, questions-and-answers, information gap, and songs.

4.1.1 The Transactional Tasks

Transactional tasks included *matching games, bingo, doing worksheets,* and *reading stories*. All involved the use of listening and reading skills simultaneously. Students listened to or read the descriptive texts and identified items in the description. First, a *matching game* was included as an example of a transactional task in which students learned to recognize the written words based on what they heard from the teacher. This task was used by the teachers to help learners recognize the words by matching the words with their corresponding pictures. In Transcript 1, learners were asked to match words with their pictures on two columns. The first column included familiar pictures of items such as a dog, a house, a flower, etc., while the second column included the written names of these items. According to teacher interview data, using these tasks helped develop the beginning learners' receptive skills of listening and reading in English.

Transcript 1

T: Are you ready? (The teacher sets the flashcards on the board.)

S1&S2:   Ready.

T:→   <u>Doctor.</u>

S1&S2:→   (S1 points to the word "doctor "while S2 hesitates.)

T: Good! The answer is doctor. (pointing to the flashcard "doctor")

Second, *bingo* was a task in which a square with boxes were filled in with some words related to the content and the boxes could be crossed out as the teacher mentioned them to class. The winner was the student who completed the lines accurately. Transcript 2 included an example of *bingo* which required learners to listen while the teacher pronounced the word they needed to cross out. The purpose of this task was to help learners recognize the words and listen carefully to the words the teacher mentioned.

Transcript 2

T: Are you ready?

Ss   Yes!

T:→   Number one, <u>bird</u>.

Ss: →   (Students then cross out the word, cat, on their squares.)

T: O.K. Number two is "cat."

            (Continues…)

Third, in *worksheets*, students were given a piece of paper and they were required to complete it in order to assess their comprehension. As a transactional task type, *worksheets* provided the students with the opportunity to scrapple and draw lines on the worksheets. This task type was introduced to students as a form of feedback to check on their understanding of the listening and reading skills that were introduced during the entire period of the lesson. Fourth, in the task type of *reading stories*, the students' attention was drawn while listening to a short story being read in English. A story provided a contextualized learning experience in which the teachers aimed to improve the students' reading and listening skills. By enabling the students to grasp the simple plot, they also listened to the new vocabulary words that were used in the short story. When the teacher read the story aloud and emphasized the new words, the students were requested to listen to the correct pronunciation of the words. *Reading stories* were quite verbal in that the teacher was the main narrator and she was also the one who assisted learners' comprehension. During reading stories, the teacher used the strategy of asking questions to check the

learners' comprehension.

4.1.2 The Interactional Tasks

The first interactional task type, *questions-and-answers* consisted of a teacher directly asking the students to answer routine questions that she asks every class and the students respond in unison as a class. According to the teacher, this task type relieved the anxiety some students might have to speak alone by being part of a group. It helped to develop students' speaking skills and ability in using regular sentence patterns. Transcript 3 included an example of *questions-and-answers* in which the students had the opportunity to interact with their classmates and the teacher and in the process also used English for everyday communication purposes.

Transcript 3

T: How are you?

Ss: I'm fine. Thank you. And you?

T: I'm good. What <u>colors</u> do you like best, Aisha?

S1:→   Yellow.

T: That's good. How about you, Laila?

S2:→   I like blue.

In this transcript, students were asked a few questions in which the teacher aimed to encourage the students to use the skills of speaking and listening. The students responded to the teacher based on listening to her oral question. The objective of this sequence was to familiarize the students with the spoken answers to this kind of question.

Because they involved an exchange of information and a give-and-take between the teacher and students, the classroom tasks of *information gap tasks* and *role plays* were also added to the category of interactional task types. *Information gap tasks* in which one person had information that the others lacked, required students to convey and request information. They had to use English to share the information that they lacked. Students learned to ask questions and listen to other students' answers. Transcript 4 demonstrated student participation in an information gap task. The teacher in this *information gap task* divided the students into pairs each of which got a different piece of paper. Each pair needed to get the information from the others to fill in the blanks on their piece of paper. They developed their language skills while coping with asking questions and conveying information.

Transcript 4

S1:   Is number two a cat?

S2:→   Yes. (S1 then writes down the word, <u>cat</u>.)   Is number one a bear?

S1:→   No, it's a <u>horse</u>.

S2:   Number three?

S1:→   A <u>dog</u>. And number four?

S2:→   A <u>bird</u>. (They continue until they finish filling the blanks.)

Similarly, *role plays* were tasks that encouraged students to speak in the relatively safe environment of the classroom. In a *role play*, students were assigned particular roles in the target language. For example, one student played the role of a mother teaching her daughter at home, and the other played the role of the child who tried to learn from her mother.

4.1.3 The Transactional/Interactional Tasks

Some tasks demanded the teacher's transaction of instructions to the class, and at a subsequent stage of the task, the teacher's interaction with the students was required for task completion. For example, the tasks of *songs* and *chants* which were used to promote a positive attitude toward the L2 in the classroom, began with the teacher asking the students about a song or chant that they were familiar with. *Songs* are musical compositions with words and *chants* include a rhythmic group recitation. At the initial stage of these two tasks, the teacher set up the class for these activities by reminding the students of the chants and songs through asking a series of questions. When most of the students remembered the song or chant, a subsequent stage of the task included an interaction with the students in which the teacher sang one line of the song and the whole class responded by singing the following line of the song or chant. The last stage of the task involved the teacher using rhythm and

rhyme to encourage the students to sing with enthusiasm. In Transcript 5, students were already familiar with the song. When the teacher asked them about the duck, they all became excited and eager to sing the song. As they started to sing, they became active and this created a good learning context in the classroom.

Transcript 5

T: Remember the song, *Old McDonald had a farm*?

Ss: Yes!

T: →   So, do you like the duck, *Donald*?

Ss: Yes.

T: Let's sing it together, O.K.?

T&Ss:→   There was a farmer who had a duck, and Donald was his name…

            (Students keep singing until they can sing the entire song.)

4.2 Teachers' Attitudes toward Skill Integration

The study focused on teachers' attitudes because they were considered by the researchers as crucial in accepting or rejecting a new teaching technique or method. Based on these attitudes, teachers may or may not feel inclined to implement the integrated skills technique in teaching and testing their students in the classroom. Data analysis targeted the teachers' attitudes toward using skill integration in teaching English. The survey on the teachers' attitudes toward skill integration was divided into two major parts: (1) teaching English with skill integration in the curriculum, and (2) integrating skills in task design and evaluation.

Table 2. Teachers' attitudes toward skill integration

Teachers' Attitudes toward Skill Integration	Mean	SD
Teaching English with Skill Integration in the Curriculum		
1. Skill integration is a current trend	3.68	0.28
2. Curriculum demands skill integration in task design	3.54	0.70
3. Textbook requires two or more skills in my classes	3.28	0.74
4. Skill integration has positive learning outcomes	2.24	0.88
Integrating Skills in Task Design and Evaluation		
5. I integrate the skills in daily task design	2.58	0.62
6. Skill integration can develop the four language skills	3.46	0.38
7. Useful for L2 learners with different proficiency levels	2.28	0.59
8. Need for skill integration in test design	1.87	0.34

4.2.1 Teaching English with Skill Integration in the Curriculum

The first part of the survey in Table 2 included four survey items that focused on the teachers' attitudes toward the existing English curriculum demands for skill integration. Items 1, 2, and 3 received consistent responses from the teachers that ranged from "agree" to "strongly agree." Item 4, however, was more controversial and revealed that most teachers were not certain that using skill integration in the classroom may lead to positive learning outcomes (i.e., good results on the final English exam). Item 1 indicated that the teachers displayed a consensus view on skill integration as a current trend (M = 3.68). Item 2 indicated that they acknowledged the curriculum demands for skill integration in task design (M = 3.54), and item 3 showed that most of them agreed the textbook required two or more skills in their classes (M = 3.28). However, in response to item 4, the teachers displayed some doubts on the positive learning outcomes of skill integration (M = 2.24). These results indicated that they had mixed attitudes toward skill integration. On the one hand, they acknowledged and implemented curriculum and textbook requirements on skill integration. On the other hand, they were uncertain about its potential benefits for their students' learning outcomes on the final English exam.

The standard deviations among the items of part 1 also showed inconsistencies between the first item and items two, three, and four of the survey. Item 1 indicated that most teachers agreed that skill integration is a current trend (SD = 0.28) while items 2, 3, and 4 showed inconsistencies among the teachers' attitudes toward the role of the curriculum in skill integration as related to the issues of task design, classroom implementation, and positive learning outcomes. There were inconsistencies among the teachers in the responses to item 2 of the survey on

curriculum demands for skill integration in task design (SD = 0.70), and item 3 on textbook requirements to integrate two or more skills in daily classes (SD = 0.74). However, the teachers differed among themselves on item 4 of the survey on the positive learning outcomes of skill integration tasks (SD = 0.88). The variation on the mean and standard deviation in item 4 of the survey meant that the teachers, even though they adopted skill integration in their classrooms, were not really certain that skill integration tasks were ultimately helpful for the students in passing the English final exam. This made sense to the researchers because the idea behind introducing skill integration tasks in the classroom is primarily based on promoting students' communicative ability and building their confidence to use English, rather than on promoting students' accuracy of language forms. Teachers' use of transactional and interactional tasks was especially appropriate for developing target language fluency but was not focused on building their accurate use of grammar rules. The teachers, therefore, lacked agreement about the potential learning outcomes of tasks in terms of accuracy rather than fluency due to the traditional English testing methods which focus mostly on measuring the students' linguistic rather than communicative competence.

4.2.2 Integrating Skills in Task Design and Evaluation

The second part of the survey in Table 2, integrating skills in daily task design and evaluation, explored the teachers' attitudes as they were manifested in their actual classroom practice. Items 5, 6, 7, and 8 focused on the teachers' attitudes toward implementing skill integration in their teaching and test design. The results indicated that there were inconsistencies in the teachers' responses to items 5, 6, 7, and 8. The agreement between the teachers' responses to items 5 and 7 indicated that teachers did not "strongly agree" or "strongly disagree" on either integrating skills in daily task design or the usefulness of skill integration for learners at different proficiency levels. However, most teachers responded favorably to developing the four language skills through skill integration tasks in item 6, which ranged from "agree" to "strongly agree" on the survey. Similarly, most of the teachers objected to the need for skill integration in test design in item 8, which ranged from "disagree" to "strongly disagree." Item 5 indicated the teachers had mixed attitudes toward skill integration in their daily practice. This meant that while some did, the others did not implement skill integration tasks in their daily lesson plans (M = 2.58). Item 6 indicated that most teachers agreed that developing the four language skills can be achieved through skill integration tasks (M = 3.46). Item 7 revealed that some teachers were uncertain on whether skill integration was useful for leaners at different proficiency levels (M = 2.28). Most importantly, in response to item 8, most of the teachers were uncertain about the need to incorporate skill integration tasks in test design (M = 1.87). This meant that while they knew how to make tests that tap the students' accuracy of language forms, they lacked training on how to design test items that measure their students' aural/oral skills (i.e., their ability to listen and speak).

The standard deviations among the items of part 2 also displayed inconsistencies among items 5, 6, 7, and 8. Item 5 indicated that not all the teachers incorporated skill integration in their task design (SD = 0.62). Item 6 revealed little variation among the teachers' responses on developing the four skills through skill integration (SD = 0.38). Item 7 showed that not all the teachers agreed that skill integration can be useful to learners with different proficiency levels (SD = 0.59). In item 8, most teachers did not support the need for skill integration in test design (SD = 0.34). In general, the survey data indicated the teachers' ambivalent attitudes toward the significance and role of skill integration in the existing English curriculum and their actual classroom practice.

4.3 Conclusion

The data results indicated that the majority (60%) of the various tasks used in the English classroom were, in fact, tasks that promoted skill integration in one way or another. Skill integration tasks were classified into transactional, interactional, and mixed transactional-interactional task types. Transactional tasks which focus on conveying factual information included *matching games, bingo, worksheets,* and *reading stories.* Interactional tasks which focus on information exchange for communicative purposes included *questions-and-answers, information gap tasks,* and *role plays.* Mixed transactional/interactional tasks included *songs* and *chants* which involved rhythms and rhymes to promote a positive attitude toward the L2. More transactional tasks than interactional tasks were used by the teachers in the classroom observations. This may be explained by the fact that the teachers who participated in the study were first, second, and third grade English teachers who knew the learners are going through a "silent" stage in which the most important skill to be used in the classroom is the listening skill to be followed by the other skills of speaking and reading. The data of classroom observations showed that the teachers focused mostly on integrating listening and speaking, or listening and reading skills.

With regard to teachers' attitudes toward skill integration, most teachers displayed their professional awareness of skill integration in the existing English curriculum. They also acknowledged that the curriculum demanded

skill integration in task design, and that the textbook required two or more skills in their classes. Due to the negative washback effect of the existing discrete-point tests, the teachers were, however, uncertain about the learning outcomes of skill integration. Even though most teachers displayed positive attitudes toward developing the four language skills through skill integration, not all the teachers incorporated skill integration in their daily task design. Some of them showed their uncertainty about whether skill integration can be applied to learners at different proficiency levels. This uncertainty is probably caused by the teachers' need to equip learners at different proficiency levels to successfully pass end-of-term final exams. These exams tend to measure students' accuracy of language forms rather than their ability to use the language for communication. Moreover, most teachers showed ambivalence on the need for skill integration in test design, which implied more teacher training may be needed to enhance teachers' knowledge of integrating communication skills in test design.

5. Implications for L2 Pedagogy

Skill integration is a language teaching technique which can positively impact learners' communicative language skills without adversely hampering the development of their linguistic accuracy. Several pedagogical recommendations are based on the data analysis conducted for this study. First, even though the majority of the participating teachers were conscious of the importance of skill integration, a considerable number of them did not deliberately apply it in the classroom as part of their daily teaching practices. This general ambivalence toward skill integration can be explained partly because of the negative washback effect of final English tests which focus mainly on measuring linguistic accuracy rather than on communicative competence. There is, therefore, a need to raise the consciousness of teachers to the gap between their attitudes and practices. Second, English teachers need to be encouraged to develop communicative tests that involve skill integration and emphasize the development of the four language skills. To counter the negative washback effect of conventional discrete-point tests, communicative tests are thus crucial to measure learners' developing communicative competence in the L2. A positive washback effect can gradually take place when both teachers and learners know that some parts of the final exams are going to measure linguistic competence, while some other parts are going to measure communicative competence. Third, students of all proficiency levels need to be exposed to both interactional and transactional tasks in the classroom. Interactional tasks tend to provide students with more opportunities to produce the language, that is, their productive skills, while transactional tasks aim to develop learners' receptive skills. Because they are going through a silent period, transactional tasks are essential for beginning learners at the pre-production stage of L2 development. Interactional tasks can help more advanced learners develop their communicative ability in the L2. Finally, more teacher training is needed to develop teachers' professional knowledge to implement skill integration in their teaching practices and to design communicative tests that emphasize communication skills as the desired learning outcome of teaching the L2.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, there are four suggestions for future research. First, the present study was conducted on a sample of first, second, and third grade English teachers at the primary school level in Kuwait which normally caters for beginning level learners at the ages of 6, 7, and 8. To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, future studies may include larger samples of teachers of different age groups of learners at different proficiency levels. Second, more classroom-based studies are needed to empirically investigate the impact of different skill integration tasks on different age groups of learners and at different levels of proficiency in EFL. Third, since this study found that more transactional tasks were used with beginning-level learners than interactional tasks, more research is needed to investigate the possibility of matching different transactional and interactional tasks to different proficiency levels of learners in EFL settings. Finally, more research is needed to generate a taxonomy of task specifications of both transactional and interactional tasks. Such a taxonomy can be used to describe the learning potential of different tasks for different proficiency levels of EFL learners, as well as the time duration it takes to perform a specific task in the classroom, and the equipment needed to conduct such a task. Task specification can offer a valuable resource for English teachers who are considering introducing skill integration tasks in their classrooms to help develop the communicative competence of learners at different proficiency levels in EFL.

References

Al-Hajji, B., Taqi, H., & Shuqair, K. (2013). Students' perceptions of questioning strategies in an Adult EFL classroom in the English Department at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. *Philology*, *59*(1). Retrieved from http://aljournal.shams.edu.eg/ index.php/philology/article/view/312

Allen, J., & Iggulden, M. (2002). *Fun with English: Teacher's Guide*. Kuwait: Al-Resala Printing Press.

Aljumah, F. (2011). Developing Saudi EFL students' oral skills: An integrative approach. *English Language*

Teaching, *4*(3), 84-89. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n3p84

Anthony, E. M. (1963). Approach, method, and technique. *English Language Teaching*, *17*(2), 63-67.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Brown, D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). NY: Pearson Education.

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (2002). *Criterion-referenced language testing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Canale, M. (l983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. Richards, & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-17). London: Longman.

Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.

Donmoyer, R. (1995). The rhetoric and reality of systemic reform: A critique of the proposed National Science Education Standards. *Theory into Practice*, *34*(1), 30-34.

Donmoyer, R., & Galloway, F. (2010). Reconsidering the utility of case study designs for researching school reform in a neo-scientific era: Insights from a multiyear, mixed-methods Study. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *46*(1), 3-30. http:// dx.doi.org/ 10.1177/1094670509353041

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hinkel, E. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching the four skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(1), 109-131. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/40264513

Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. D. (1983). *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. San Francisco: The Alemany Press.

McDonough, J., Christopher, S., & Masuhara, H. (2013). *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide* (3rd ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Mekheimer, M. A., & Aldosari, H. S. (2013). Evaluating an integrated EFL teaching methodology in Saudi Universities: A longitudinal Study. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *4*(6), 1264-1276. http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.6.1264-1276

Oxford, R. (2001). Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL Classroom. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics. Retrieved from ERIC database (ED 456670).

Richards, J. C. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. SEAMEO, Regional Language Center.

Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (2013). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Savignon, S. J. (2001). Communicative language teaching for the twenty-first century. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd ed., pp. 13-28). Boston, MA: Heinle &Heinle.

Shaaban, K. A. (2013). Disparity between ideals and reality in curriculum construction: The case of the Lebanese English language curriculum. *Creative Education*, *4*(12), 28-34. http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ce.2013.412A2005

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (Eds.). (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Copyrights