

Enhancing Intensive English Program Reading and Writing Courses through Integrated-Skill Activities

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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive global Intensive English Programs (IEPs) environment (Benshoff, 2018), developing courses that efficiently meet student needs and equip students with skills essential for university success is paramount. Many IEPs develop reading and writing (RW) courses around one textbook for reading and another for writing, essentially separating RW skills from listening and speaking skills (Oxford, 2001). However, our university foundation-year program has started to integrate listening and speaking skills with instruction and assessment into RW courses. Instructors have observed what appear to be increased gains in learning when students pre-read, read, discuss, listen to related lectures, present, and then write about academic topics. Students' writing reveals greater voice as they seem to understand topics more deeply and have developed greater fluency with ideas and terminology and an increased ability to paraphrase, summarize, and synthesize, aligning with findings in related literature (e.g., Horowitz, 1986). This integrated-skill approach also more closely resembles university tasks than the segregated-skill approach does. This article explains the integrated-skill approach, examines its impact on revitalizing IEP RW instruction, and showcases some sample activities.

Keywords

reading and writing (RW), extensive reading, integrated-skill approach (ISA), student success, Intensive English Programs (IEPs)

Background

Although the concept of the integrated-skill approach (ISA) is not new to Intensive English Programs (IEPs; Brauer, n.d.), there seems to be little agreement among IEP instructors regarding which specific components should be included in reading and writing (RW) courses. Some programs employ a segregated-skill approach to language instruction, where the mastery of discrete language skills (e.g., reading or speaking) is deemed paramount to successful learning (Oxford, 2001). However, many scholars have described the effectiveness and merits of ISA (Bentahar, 2021; Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Gautam, 2019; Lee, 2006; Mitrofanova & Chemezov, 2011; Su, 2007), where several of the four main skills, as well as related or associated skills (e.g.,

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spelling, vocabulary, and syntax), are “interwoven during instruction,” leading to “optimal ESL/EFL communication” (Oxford, 2001, p. 2).

ISA is an effective teaching approach that “focuses on [the] mastery of meaning, fluency and communication as a whole language system” (Gautam, 2019, p. 106). In Taiwan, for example, 90% of the student participants recommended continuing ISA after 65 English as a foreign language (EFL) students were exposed to authentic materials and realistic activities through ISA, enhancing seamless interaction with texts and classmates (Su, 2007). ISA has also been associated with enthusiastic student attitudes (Mitrofanova & Chemezov, 2011) and greater language proficiency when compared to instruction with content organized and delivered with the intent to teach grammar (Alptekin et al., 2007). While ISA has been linked to natural language production by students (Sanchez, 2000), it has also positively influenced student writing performance when reading, listening, and writing are integrated (Heffernan, 2006). One final note worth sharing is that the sequencing of the activities used in a lesson or series of lessons should begin with receptive skills before proceeding to productive ones (McDonough et al., 2013).

Impact of ISA Informed by the Classroom

The new credit-bearing foundation-year program at our university successfully uses an ISA to RW instruction and assessment. Using ISA, classroom activities combine several skills to equip low-advanced level international students, predominantly from China and Saudi Arabia, with the competencies and knowledge they need to succeed with university reading and writing tasks. Prior to 2017, our program taught pre-university courses following the segregated-skill approach, with listening and speaking skills being minimized in RW instruction. In transitioning from the segregated-skill approach to ISA, and having taught RW using both approaches, we have observed several positive changes after implementing ISA in the classroom.

We have observed that students more confidently use vocabulary acquired through reading and discussion in their summary, response, and synthesis writing. Moreover, the students seem to enjoy freer and more natural discussion leading to more appropriate language in writing using ISA. One student who took the same course twice, once in an RW-only manner, and once by ISA, even voluntarily reported on three occasions the ISA course was considerably more enjoyable. Considering these observations, it is our view that learning gains increase and are likely more permanent, and activities are more affectively appealing when several learning tasks and skills are integrated. More satisfactory levels of student engagement and grasp of content were also manifest in the students’ speaking and writing performances. Based on classroom observations, we agree with Kebede (2013) that ISA increases purpose for learning, brings variety and authenticity, improves transfer of knowledge to other areas, develops overall communicative competence, and enhances analysis and synthesis better than segregated-skill courses do.

Amidst declining student populations in schools and plummeting enrollments in IEPs, which suffered 26% loss of enrollment in 2016 and 2017 at the national level (Benshoff, 2018), perhaps the advantages of ISA are noteworthy. College students, both domestic and international, are consistently required to write or speak about what they hear in lectures or read in textbooks or other sources; therefore, IEP RW instruction that requires the integration of all skill areas aims to match university requirements and to equip students to be successful at processing the information they are expected to master. The goal is the effective and economical acquisition of multiple skills simultaneously.

Sample Integrated-Skill Activities from the Language Classroom

What follows are several typical assignments used in ISA classes in our IEP. While the focus of this article is on reading-based techniques integrating other language skills, not all ISA activities have to begin with reading, so sharing one activity involving listening as the basis of integration is worthwhile.

Listening-Oriented Activity

One integrated-skill activity is for ESL/EFL students to listen to a lecture and take notes. Pre-teaching the techniques of effective note-taking before students engage in this activity is vital. Some of these techniques include using outline-style organization with relationships displayed by indentation with dashes, abbreviating, telegramming ideas without worrying about grammar, employing symbols, and noting spoken details in addition to information on slides. Then, they use their notes to answer discussion questions in small groups. Each group can eventually collaboratively write a summary of the lecture based on its answers to those questions. Many researchers (e.g., Khazaal, 2019; Oxford, 2001) agree that summarizing or analyzing text, including auditory text, in written form helps ESL/EFL students activate their writing skills. This activity incorporates listening, note-taking, speaking, and writing, building a wide variety of skills necessary for university study.

Reading Comprehension Activity

One textbook unit deals with health. After completing pre-reading and reading activities associated with four key texts in the unit, students also listen to and watch a video created by the second author of this article, while taking notes they will use for discussion. After the discussion, they write a synthesis paper using ideas from at least two textbook readings, the video, their discussion, and a supplemental source of their choosing, all cited in APA format. This assignment helps students learn content knowledge on the topic of health with targeted reading and vocabulary development and assessment. It also consolidates their ideas orally and culminates with a synthesis paper where the students demonstrate essential skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing. Overall, this entire process weaves in and out among reading, listening, speaking, and various forms of writing. Similar progressions may be followed in textbook units dealing with any topic that is applicable to ESL/EFL students.

Another typical ISA task is for ESL/EFL students to read an article and to highlight the main ideas while they are reading it. After reading and highlighting, they create a list of bullet points summarizing the main ideas of the text to share in a small or large group discussion; the group must then discuss the significance of each bullet point. This activity integrates reading, short-form writing by creating the bullet points, speaking, and listening. The condensation of a text into bullet points and subsequent re-expansion of those points in group discussion is an effective way for students to acquire the language and ideas of a text while still activating their writing skills (Oxford, 2001).

A third integrated-skill activity involves students reading an article, processing it, and answering comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises. After checking the text comprehension, the instructor dictates a short (20–50 words) passage from that article, and students write down the passage as dictated. Then, they can compare what they wrote to the actual text in the source and discuss what parts of the dictation they missed and why. This self-assessment and “*languageing*” by the students about their own strengths and weaknesses in listening helps them notice peculiarities in the language and consider strategies to apply for personal improvement. If

the results are presented to the class, the entire class becomes more aware of the subtleties and challenges of listening, such as catching word endings, reductions, and vocabulary that they recognize visually but not aurally. This activity integrates listening, writing, discussing, presenting, and using metacognitive skills.

Extended Reading Activity

One method of integrating skills requires the incorporation of extensive or extended reading into speaking or writing learning activities. Fields (2017) noted that extensive reading is long reading that is at or below level, freely read, and unassessed (Day & Bamford, 1998), while extended reading uses relatively long articles that are above level, assigned, and assessed. He also found extended reading an effective alternative to extensive reading. In the context of our university academic transitions program, the aim of which is to enable students to bridge the gap between reading at perhaps a 9th-grade level and being able to read college textbooks, a 200+ page book that may be above student reading levels is used. For example, one book presents findings of a major scientific study related to longevity, so it has a Lexile level of 11th to 12th grade. Students read this extended reading book over the course of the semester, at a pace of a chapter with approximately 20 pages per week. This pace might approximate a few articles similar to those described by Fields (2017). Students are instructed to highlight the main ideas and note unknown vocabulary from their assigned pages.

During discussion, students present that vocabulary to the class, teaching each other vocabulary from their own annotations. Then, in small groups, they discuss comprehension questions prepared by the instructor. Each group then presents its answers to a set of questions to the class. Finally, each student writes a summary of the chapter, properly emphasizing the most important point of the chapter and including the main idea(s) of each section of the chapter. Students are also instructed to include a small quotation from the chapter with the proper citations and references per APA format. Alternatively, they may write a reflective response to the chapter with similar citation instructions. This activity integrates reading, vocabulary building, discussing, presenting, writing, and academic citing.

An additional method for integrating skills can be employed when the extended reading book is related to a theme or themes from the reading textbook because, as Sedita (2018) posited, readers' knowledge about a given topic can lead to improved reading comprehension. After building knowledge through longer and deeper reading, students can compare and contrast the ideas from the extended reading book and the reading textbook in small or large group discussion (see Table 1). This discussion can then be the springboard for writing assignments such as a compare-and-contrast essay (see Figure 1). The processing and re-processing of material fosters students' understanding of language and content, as well as voice in their writing. Simultaneously, such work cultivates students' essential university-level skills, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, thinking critically, and using varied sources.

Another effective exercise is for the instructors to use a National Public Radio interview with the authors of the longevity book, wherein the students hear the authors' voices and responses to callers' questions and/or comments. This exercise is well integrated because the students connect what they have read over several weeks with what they are hearing. In addition, instructors provide group discussion questions, with each group member responsible for answering 2-3 questions, synthesizing information from the interview and the book and connecting this information with the students' own culture.

Table 1
Results of Discussion Comparing Textbook with Extended Reading

Factor	Textbook	Extended Reader
Sanitation	<i>Very important</i>	<i>More important than medicine</i>
Vaccines	<i>May help eradicate malaria</i>	<i>One of the strengths of medicine</i>
Medicine	<i>Extend life but expensive; access not equal</i>	<i>Overmedicalization is a problem</i>
Education	<i>Key to future increases</i>	<i>Education per se not important; conscientiousness and success much more so</i>
Diet	<i>Important</i>	<i>U.S. obesity has increased with greater public attention to diet (since 1960s)</i>
Personality factors	<i>Not addressed</i>	<i>Conscientiousness extremely important; catastrophizing deadly</i>
Social factors	<i>Not addressed</i>	<i>Social networks, altruism and steady marriage important</i>
Career success	<i>Not addressed</i>	<i>Important, but conscientiousness is underlying factor</i>

Note. This figure demonstrates results of discussion where the students compared content from the textbook unit readings(s) and the extended reading

Figure 1

Basic Instructions for the Compare-Contrast Essay Assignment

Your reading textbook and your extended reader both shared views on factors that influence longevity. Sometimes they were similar, but sometimes they were quite different. Compare and contrast the claims of the two sources in a compare and/or contrast essay. Begin with a definition of longevity. Then assert that similarities and/or differences exist between the two sources and mention three points you will discuss (This all will be in your introduction.) Then continue to explain those similarities and/or differences in the following paragraphs, and wrap up your essay with a conclusion.

- You must cite the textbook and the extended reader.
- The table you filled out in your group discussion will be of great use to you.
- Citations and a reference list must be properly formatted
- Include one quotation and cite it properly.
- Use academic language.

Note. This figure demonstrates an assignment where the students compare and/or contrast longevity factors using two sources, the textbook unit and the extended reading.

Conclusion

The core strength of the aforementioned activities within the course is that students not only read and write, but they also listen, discuss, and present content. Per our observations and student feedback, the integrated-skill approach (ISA) to reading and writing (RW) instruction and assessment seems to be more effective than teaching skills in an isolated manner. While we have observed the expediency and feasibility of this approach to teaching RW in language institutions and have informally evaluated its effectiveness merely through anecdotal evidence, future empirical research using mixed-method designs is needed to further support student perceptions of their learning outcomes using ISA.

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