Review

The Extent to which Integrated Skills Language Teaching/Learning Approach is Depicted in Grade 9 English Textbook

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Abstract

The study aimed at critically examining the extent to which the Grade 9 English textbook - English for Ethiopia: Secondary English Course. Grade 9 Students’ Book (2003) is designed in an integrated skills language teaching/learning approach. Method of content analysis was used to collect data. Hence, 50% of the contents of the Grade 9 English Textbook were used for content analysis. The study revealed that most of the language tasks are designed in an integrated manner in that they are appropriate in meeting this criterion with the exception of some vocabulary and grammar lessons. The study recommended that syllabus writers and language teachers amend the deficiencies revealed in designing the vocabulary and grammar lessons.

*Key words:* Atomistic language teaching/ Integrated language teaching/ Syllabus design

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background of the Study

Language helps students to learn in all subject areas, and using language for a broad range of purposes increases both their ability to communicate with precision and their understanding of how language works. Students need language skills in order to comprehend ideas and information in their academic endeavor, to interact socially, to inquire into areas of interest and study. The language curriculum needs to be designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills that they need to achieve this goal. Learning English as a foreign language is a serious challenge. “… the mysteries and wonder of human language acquisition still perplex the best of our sleuthing minds. …” (Brown, 2007: xi). Then one can ask what syllabus designers would do to make content more meaningful and to make language tasks more interactive so that communication would take place. Therefore, this study explores the strategies that inform the selection of content and the preparation of language teaching/learning materials.

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1.2 Statement of the Problem

Language helps students to learn in all subject areas, and using language for a broad range of purposes increases both their ability to communicate with precision and their understanding of how language works. Students need language skills in order to comprehend ideas and information in their academic endeavour, to interact socially, to inquire into areas of interest and study. Despite studying English as a subject in schools, colleges and universities for an extended period of time (15–18 years), the English language proficiency of many Ethiopian students is not satisfactory. My personal observations as a language practitioner in Ethiopian high schools and university have led me to believe that this problem may be attributed to the language learning material/textbooks used. This is because “In sub-Saharan African countries (SSA), teachers depend more on textbooks than it is intended by the new understanding of quality teaching; most SSA teachers follow textbooks to structure and conduct their lessons” (World Bank Working Paper, 2008, p. 52). In this regard one would argue that overdependence on textbooks will also have its own adverse effects if the books are not designed properly taking learner differences as well as principles of language learning and materials development into account.

In line with this, some proponents of authentic classroom language models argue that many tasks are too contrived and artificial in their presentation of the target language; many dialogues are unnatural and inappropriate for communicative or co-operative language teaching because they do not adequately prepare students for the types of language structures, grammar, vocabulary and conversational rules, routines and strategies that they will have to use in the real world (Yule et al., 1992; Lee, 1995). They further contend that the scripted unauthentic language found in many textbooks does not lend itself to meaningful communicative practice (language use) but instead can lead to an oversimplification of language and unrealistic views of real life situations (Yule et al., 1992; Lee, 1995). Similarly, Tomlinson (2008, p. 3) argues that many ELT materials (especially global course books) currently make a significant contribution to the failure of many learners of English as a second/foreign language, to even acquire basic competence in English or develop the ability to use it successfully. They do so by focusing on the teaching of linguistic items rather than on the provision of opportunities for acquisition and development.

Local studies related to syllabus design and teaching/learning materials development are too scarce to find. Thus, it would be imperative to examine if the development of learning material adheres to a broad set of procedures that are based on generally accepted theoretical constructs. Therefore, the effectiveness of the teaching/learning material in meeting the learning outcomes, the feasibility of the teaching methodologies and the learning strategies employed in helping students build the essential communicative skills need to undergo rigorous scrutiny so as to make the teaching/learning process more effective and productive.
1.3 The Research Question

The study endeavours to answer the following research question: To what extent are the Grade 9 English language tasks effective in integrating different macro-skills?

1.4 Main Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically examine the effectiveness of the lessons in the ‘English for Ethiopia: Secondary English Course. Grade 9-Students’ Book’ (2003) in integrating different skills together.

2. Literature Review

Skills are the building blocks in the process of language teaching and learning. In the past few decades the segregated-skill approach, where one or two skills were presented in isolation, was dominant in foreign language classes (Oxford, 2001). Yet, educators found out that this approach of treating skills in isolation was contradictory to the natural way of acquiring a language. As a result, language learning theory has seen a gradual shift towards a more holistic view of language use. “The last thirty years have seen a move towards viewing language in much more integrative and holistic terms” (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2002, p. 12). Nunan also considers skills integration as an important vehicle for language learning, assuming that it would facilitate interaction, task continuity, natural way of language use and task outcomes (2005). From real-life experience, we also observe that language skills are rarely used in isolation where one skill is used independent of the other. The reality is, different skills interchange in most social and classroom situations where one skill reinforces another (Brown, 2001).

Scholars argue that language learning tasks need to be designed in an integrated manner (Oxford, 2001; McDonough & Shaw, 2003). This is because the more students are involved in a series of language tasks that integrate different skills, the better they learn (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). The general view among language educators is that integrated language instruction can increase learners’ opportunities for L2 purposeful communication, interaction, real-life language use and diverse types of contextualised discourse and linguistic features, all of which have the goal of developing students’ language proficiency and skills (Fotos, 2001, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Snow, 2005). When the four primary skills of language: listening, reading, speaking and writing are interwoven during instruction, it helps us emulate real-life language use and it also paves the way for optimal language learning to take place (Oxford, 2001). This could also create room in addressing various intelligence profiles.

Therefore, to ensure that students benefit optimally from the teaching/learning material, it would be imperative to examine the extent to which the English lessons in the Grade 9 English text English for Ethiopia: Secondary English Course: Grade 9 Students’ Book are effectively organised in an integrated manner.
3. Methodology

This research aims to explore the extent to which the Grade 9 English Textbook of Ethiopia is designed in line with integrated skills language teaching/learning approach. This is based on the premise that when various language skills are integrated in language teaching, language learning becomes more life-like (Deneme, 2010). The study is a type of evaluation research which is used extensively in education, where researchers compare the effectiveness of various teaching models and programmes (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009, P. 217). Evaluation research is “a systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy” (Weiss, 1998, p. 4).

3.1 Data Collection Instruments

Pertinent data were collected using document analysis. To do the analysis, therefore, 50% of the entire units of the textbook were randomly sampled and the sampled language lessons were coded, or broken down, into categories of skills integration.

3.2 Sampling Technique

The study population for content analysis is drawn from English for Ethiopia, Grade 9 Student’s Textbook. “The population is the set of units being studied, the set of units to which the researcher wishes to generalize” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 74). Systematic random sampling is used to select all the samples to be included in the study from the units of the entire population - the Grade 9 English textbook. The textbook has 12 units, and of these units 6 were taken as a sample. Therefore, every other unit from the whole textbook was sampled after determining the starting point of the procedure at random by drawing lots for even and odd numbered units of the textbook. As a result, all even numbered units were included in the study. “In content analysis, systematic samples are favoured when texts stem from regularly appearing publications, newspapers, television series, interpersonal interaction sequences, or other repetitive or continuous events” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 115).

3.3 The Content Analysis Procedures

Figure 1, which shows procedures used in the process of content analysis, enables us to conceptualise the procedures that the content analyst has to undertake in carrying out content analysis and examine the components the analyst needs to proceed from texts to results. As Krippendorff (2004, p. 83) contends, listing these components serves two purposes: it is a convenient way to partition, conceptualise, talk about, and evaluate content analysis designs step by step; it also serves as instructions for replicating them elsewhere.
In the data-making process, the first four components were followed and computable data were created from the contents of the target textbook (the Grade 9 English Textbook). The first task in any empirical study is to decide what is to be observed (units) as well as how observations are to be recorded and thereafter considered data (Krippendorff, 2004). After identifying the sampling units (units to be included in the study), context units (the detailed contents/language lessons or issues within the unit) were sorted to be investigated against a given recording unit. Similarly, categories of integration (integrated/atomistic) were taken as coding units.

3.4 Coding Procedures

All the coding procedures were fully explicated and developed into a checklist for coders to help them classify the language lessons into two categories. Final coding was done by two coders (whose level of agreement or Cohen’s Kappa was .72) independently without letting them know the purpose of neither the coding nor the study. This technique is in line with what Neuendorf calls blind coding, in which coders do not know the purpose of the study, and which also is desirable, to reduce bias that compromises validity (2002, p. 133). Scholars in the field recommend that blind coding is more preferable in which coders should not be aware of the research questions or hypotheses guiding the investigation.

To ensure validity, two independent coders were involved in coding the contents of the Grade 9 English Textbook. The coders were MA students in TEFL who took thorough training in coding texts. Therefore, to determine how well the implementation of some coding or measurement system works and test the reliability of the two coders, Inter-Rater Reliability test was carried out by calculating Cohen’s Kappa using SPSS. A statistical measure of inter-rater reliability is Cohen’s Kappa which ranges generally from 0 to 1.0 (although negative numbers are possible) where large numbers mean better reliability, values near or less than zero suggest that agreement is attributable to chance alone (Gwet, 2010).
This method is used to assess the degree to which different raters or observers give consistent estimates of the same phenomenon or categorical variables—the contents of the English language lessons in this case. We ensured that the percent of agreement between the two coders was .72 which is within the conventional range, that is the percent of agreement between the coders should be strong (0.61-0.8), or near complete agreement (more than 0.8) (Landis & Koch, 1977; Gwet, 2010).

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

Procedure of content analysis was adapted from (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 86) and applied to analyze the contents of the Grade 9 English Textbook in this study. The sampled units of the textbook were coded into the predefined content categories. After coding the contents of the textbook into categories of skills integration, the data were fed into an SPSS programme and summed up using descriptive statistics. The approach used to coding the data is \textit{a priori} coding (Weber, 1990) in which the categories were established prior to the analysis based upon integrated skills language teaching/learning approach. Then the data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

4. The Results of the Study

Table 1: Summary of the Language Tasks of the Grade 9 English Textbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Context Units</th>
<th>No. of tasks</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Word power</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Language focus</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>20.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total number of tasks</strong></td>
<td><strong>309</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Grade 9 English textbook has 12 units altogether, and of these units all the language tasks of the 6 sampled units were coded. As the table indicates, each unit accommodates language lessons categorised into 8 context units: introduction, listening, word power, language focus, reading, speaking, writing and study skills. The tasks in the ‘word power’ section focus on vocabulary lessons. The contents of the ‘language focus’ section are grammar lessons and exercises. The ‘study skills’ section gives attention to language learning strategies.

The majority of the language tasks fall under speaking, language focus and reading, which comprise 25.24 % (78 of 309), 20.71% (64 of 309) and 19.74% (61 of 309) respectively. The question is, how effectively the language tasks are designed in line with integrated skills language teaching/learning approach.
Table 2: The Level of Integration of the Language Tasks into Macro-Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Context Units</th>
<th>Integrated</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Non-integrated</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Word power</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30.77</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>69.23</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Language focus</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>53.13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46.88</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>73.77</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26.23</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>71.79</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28.21</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>81.25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>60.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40.00</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total number of tasks</strong></td>
<td><strong>204</strong></td>
<td><strong>66.02</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>33.98</strong></td>
<td><strong>309</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the content analysis indicated that 66.02% (204 of 309) of the language tasks are designed in an integrated manner, a given task calling for using a variety of skills one after the other. The listening language lessons, for example, demand the students to do some kind of writing or speaking after attending the listening text read out by their teacher. In achieving this goal, most of the language tasks are appropriate. The writing tasks, the listening lessons, as well as the reading sections are good cases in point in this regard which account for 81.25%, 75.0 % and 73.77% respectively. The tasks in the speaking lessons presented under Figure 2 below are good cases in point where speaking (task 1), inner speech (task 2) and writing (task 3) interact in a lesson.
An integrated approach to language teaching/learning will create fertile ground for better learning to take place; that is, it helps students to encounter new language items frequently by presenting a variety of tasks in different sub-skills such as reading, speaking and writing; encourages interaction among students and facilitates meaningful practice, and promotes retention at large.

On the contrary, 69.23% of the word power or vocabulary exercises (18 of 26) are deficient in integrating various skills. In addition to the vocabulary exercises, 46.88% of the
grammar lessons (30 of 64) also suffer from a similar drawback. This leads to another question: if they are not designed in an integrated manner in most cases, could they engage the learners affectively; could they promote language use, and could they be successful in providing comprehensible input? The following two tables depict the problem.

Table 3: Grammar Lessons in line with Integrated Language Teaching/Learning Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B4.13 Language focus: Comparative and superlative adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. **Look at these food adjectives:** bitter, sour, greasy, juicy, salty, tasty
   Check their meanings in a dictionary, then make a sentence for each one.
   **Example:**
   Lemons taste very bitter.

2. **Using more and most.**
   All the adjectives above are adjectives of taste. When we compare these adjectives, it is more usual to add more and most before the comparative and superlative forms: bitter, more bitter, most bitter, although adding -er and -est is equally correct: bitter, bitterer, bitterest.
   **Example:**
   Lemons always taste sour.
   Lemons taste more sour than oranges, or Lemons are sourer than oranges.
   Lemons have the most sour taste of all citrus fruit, or Lemons have the sourest taste of all citrus fruits.

(Source: English for Ethiopia: Student Textbook, Grade 9: p. 79)

The following is another example.

Table 4: Grammar Lessons in line with Integrated Language Teaching/Learning Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B12.10 Language focus: too much, too many, enough</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Complete the following sentences with too much, too many or enough.
1. There are ______ cars in Addis Ababa.
2. There isn't ______ furniture in the room.
3. Abeba has ______ clothes; she can’t wear them all.
4. There are ______ adults in the dance hall.
5. I don’t have ______ money to buy that new CD.

(Source: English for Ethiopia: Student Textbook, Grade 9: p. 221)

For one thing, quantifiers can be better presented using some pictures so that the lesson can be more comprehensible (e.g. Lesson B12.10 above). Secondly, the students are required only to provide the quantifiers in this task. These are features of atomistic approaches to learning where the focus is on unrelated parts of the task; information is simply
memorized; facts and concepts are associated unreflectively (Atherton, 2011, p. 1). Such tasks are unlikely to enhance deep learning.

5. Discussion

The findings of the content analysis indicated that most of the language tasks are designed in an integrated manner in that they are appropriate in meeting this criterion, with the exception of the vocabulary and grammar lessons. Many language educators strongly advocate that English language teaching/learning needs to be developed in an integrated manner whereby the four primary skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are interwoven during instruction (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Brown, 1994; Widowson, 1996; Oxford, 2001). This is because the approach leads to optimal language learning as it accommodates a variety of language tasks that address multiple intelligences. An integrated approach helps teaching/learning materials writers bring linguistic skills and communicative abilities closer together and gives students greater motivation and better retention of all the language learning (speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and culture) (Widowson, 1996).

Therefore, to provide a more purposeful and meaningful learning environment, it is advisable to integrate the language skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing while teaching and practising the language. This approach facilitates practising the language meaningfully with the help of rich and life-like language tasks where different skills are combined together in communicative situations. It helps language teachers enrich classroom instructions by integrating language skills and promote co-operative learning. Furthermore, an integrated approach to language teaching/learning helps language teachers accommodate multiple intelligences and thereby engage students in a variety of interconnected processes, and encourage them to practise the integrated use of language, acquire language development strategies and use language meaningfully and creatively.

On the contrary, (69.23%) of the word power or vocabulary exercises (18 of 26) as well as 46.88% of the grammar lessons (30 of 64) are deficient in integrating various skills. Such type of lessons would result in surface learning which emphasizes rote learning. “In the actual language use, one skill is rarely used in isolation…Numerous communicative situations in real life involve integrating two or more skills…” (Cunningsworth, 1984, P.46). Similarly Nunn (2006), suggests that to achieve 'competence', language learners need more than just atomistic linguistic knowledge, however essential this may be, students also need to practise putting together the parts. All the language skills are vital in the teaching/learning process and the combination of the language skills has positive effects on student success. Therefore, language lessons need to be designed in an integrated approach so that learners would be able to develop their ability to use two or more of the four skills in a life-like context and in their real life at large.
6. Conclusion

The study aimed at critically examining the extent to which the Grade 9 English textbook - English for Ethiopia: Secondary English Course. Grade 9 Students’ Book (2003) is designed in an integrated skills language teaching/learning approach. The findings indicated that most of the language tasks are designed in an integrated manner with the exception of the grammar and vocabulary lessons. In other words, most of the word power or vocabulary exercises as well as the grammar lessons are deficient in integrating various skills. Such type of lessons would result in surface learning which emphasize rote learning. The vocabularies as well as the grammar lessons are features of atomistic approaches to learning where the focus is on imparting discrete language items. As a result, information is simply memorized and facts and concepts are associated unreflectively (Atherton, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, if language lessons are not designed in an integrated manner in most cases, they are unlikely to engage the learners affectively; to promote language use, and to provide comprehensible input (Tomlinson, 2010).

7. Recommendations

Learning a second language is a complex process and designing teaching/learning materials for speakers of other languages needs to be based on current developments in learning theories, various approaches in pedagogical issues, prominent assumptions and theoretical foundations in designing a syllabus. Therefore, it is recommended that syllabus writers need to be well versed with such theoretical considerations. Theories of learning and research findings on language teaching/learning have generated a number of insights where student-centred learning makes a significant difference; where every student matters, and where attention needs to be paid to individual motivation and ways of learning.

It is also recommended that this is high time to redefine learning from “one -size -fits-all” into a “one -size -fits-one” approach. English language teaching/learning materials need to be developed in an integrated manner whereby the four primary skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are interwoven during instruction. An integrated approach to syllabus design would help to accommodate multiple intelligences and thereby engage students in a variety of interconnected processes, and encourage them to practise the integrated use of language, acquire language development strategies and use language meaningfully and creatively. Furthermore, it is recommended to undertake further study on the effectiveness of the language lessons in terms of principles of task design and materials development.
References


