Teaching the Four Skills

THE ABILITY TO use a language in a communicative way, however, is not just a single unified skill. Most recent thinking has divided language ability into four separate skill areas; *listening, reading, speaking, and writing.* Listening and reading are known as the *receptive skills;* while speaking and writing are known as the *productive skills.*

According to SIL International (1999). The four basic skills are related to each other by two parameters:

the mode of communication: oral or written

the direction of communication: receiving or producing the message

SIL's webpage further represents the skills using the chart reproduced below:

	Oral	Written
Receptive	Listening	Reading
Productive	Speaking	Writing

Most teachers try to incorporate all four skill areas into their planning, though some classes may focus more on one set of skills or the other, due to the course and learner objectives (Oxford, 2001).

When learning new language material, the order of acquisition is generally this, for both second language learners and children learning their first language:

Listening: The learner hears a new item (sound, word, grammar feature, etc.)

Speaking: The learner tries to repeat the new item.

Reading: The learner sees the new item in written form.

Writing: The learner reproduces the written form of the item.

When you are planning to present a new teaching item (sound, grammar point, vocabulary word, etc.,) keep the order of acquisition in mind. It is best to expose the learners to the item in that same order, so that they are exposed to it as a listener before they are called on to use it as a speaker, and that they hear it before they see it in text. In this way, the order of learning a second language is similar to the way a child learns his or her first language. He/she will be able to understand the new item for quite a while before he/she is able to produce it and use it in communication (Laubach Literacy Action, 1996).

In technical terms, the difference between being able to understand an item and being able to produce it is known as *passive* versus *active knowledge.* So it is important to expose learners to a large amount of material using the new item before they are able to actually employ it in communication. Even though it is not apparent, your learners will be absorbing the new items on an unconscious level.

Consequently, you should expect that the learners will go through a period of being exposed to new language and internalizing it before they can produce. They will be able to understand, but will not be able to produce. It is because of this so-called "silent period" that many recent approaches to language teaching are "comprehension-based". This means that the instructor presents material that does not require the students to respond verbally, but rather allows them to show comprehension without having to actually produce speech in the target language (Larsen-Feeman, D. 2000).

FURTHER READING

Online

Oxford, Rebecca. (2001). *Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL Classroom.* ERIC Digest ED456670. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. Available from http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/esl.htm

Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (2006). *The Adult Learner- Module 3: Curriculum; Basic Literacy Skills available from:* http://www.c-pal.net/course/module3/m3_basic_lit_skills.html

SIL International. (1999). *The Four basic language skills.* Available from: http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/language learning/OtherResources/GudlnsFrALnggAndCltrLrnng Prgrm/FourBasicLanguageSkills.htm

Print

Celce-Murcia, M. ed. (1991). *Teaching English as a Second of Foreign Language, 2nd ed.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Laubach Literacy Action (1996). *Teaching Adults: An ESL resource book.* Syracuse, NY: New Reader's Press.

Larsen-Feeman, Diane. (2000). *Techniques and Principals in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nunan, D. ed. (2003). *Practical English Language Teaching.* New York: McGraw-Hill

Activities

Teach English in Asia — ESL and English Games and Activities Directory. http://www.teachenglishinasia.net/tefl-tesl-games-and-activities-directory

EFL/ESL Lessons and Lesson Plans from The Internet TESL Journal: http://iteslj.org/Lessons