

FOCAL SKILL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Burdyko P.V.

Belarusian State University

Through daily activities, teachers provide learners with opportunities to develop different language skills: students *listen, speak, read* and *write*. Undoubtedly, **these four skills are useful because** in the language classroom they serve many valuable purposes: they give learners support, opportunities to create contexts in which to use the language for exchanges of real information, evidence of their own ability and, most important, confidence.

Nowadays it often happens that learners of foreign languages are provided only with the opportunities that develop language skills separately. At first they, for example, listen to a dialogue, then do fill-in-the-blank exercises, read an interview and in the end do a role-play. On the one hand the students develop all the four skills doing different exercises, but on the other hand these skills can be combined in just one activity. The four skills work in tandem when the activities that require their use are designed to support learners in the *process* of learning, creating and producing a specific product. Teachers should promote a well-rounded, simultaneous development of the four language skills. But sometimes they have difficulties with planning, incorporating and combining such activities. The use of all the skills simultaneously provides learners with opportunities to create, contexts in which to use the language for various purposes and evidence of their own ability.

One of the approaches to develop the four language competences simultaneously is focal skill approach.

The goal of *Focal skill approach* is to focus on the development of competency in the weakest of the four skills.

The basic structure of the Focus skills is the sequence of the following modules: Listening, Reading, Writing and Advanced; and the sequence of placement tests: Listening, Reading and Writing.

At first learners take a Listening test. The learners, whose results are below the Intermediate level, are placed into a Listening module, the rest do a Reading test. The learners with poor results are placed into a Reading module, the others go on to a Writing test. Those with results below Upper-Intermediate level are placed into a Writing module, the rest go on to Advanced module. This placement system follows the principle of Progressive Functional Skill Integration. By putting Listening on the first place the teacher can be sure that learners will understand what is going on in the later modules. Listening is also very important in the development of reading, which in turn is a foundation for writing. Speaking develops gradually throughout the modules. By the time learners reach the Advanced module all four skills are developed.

Examples of Teaching activities used in modules

In all modules the Focal skills approach emphasizes four key principles:

- 1) Progressive functional skill integration.
- 2) Comprehensible input.
- 3) Low affective filter.

Affective filter is the term used by Stephen Krashen to refer to the negative factors that may interfere with the reception and processing of comprehensible input. These factors include boredom, anxiety, annoyance etc. In Focal skill approach everything is done in order to low this filter. Students are not tested on the material they are working with. They are not required to perform if they aren't ready or aren't willing to do it etc.

- 4) Authentic materials.

The major activity in Listening module is Movie Talk. The teacher shows authentic movies, narrates scenes and actions, and paraphrases dialogues if necessary. The movie makes the teacher's input more comprehensible. There isn't any stress for learners because their only task is just to watch and listen. Talk show activity can also be used. Here two teachers converse and interact with a group describing realia and actions.

The most popular activity in Reading module is Interactive Reading. It's a group activity during which the teacher often reads aloud. As the learners have already had functional listening comprehension, they can understand the teacher and take part in discussions.

Personal or Free Voluntary Reading is also used. Here the learners are provided with an opportunity to read for their own interests and pleasure. The teacher's role is an advisor or facilitator.

In Co-author technique learners' reading abilities serve as a foundation for the development of their writing skills. Learners read a number of texts, articles to find different ideas and produce a short writing project. The teacher confers with them, then rewrites selected portions of the learner's work correcting mistakes. The learner reads teacher's several times and asks questions if necessary.

The Advanced module can be thought of as an interface between a focal skills programme and learner's future educational or occupational objectives. A Mini-Course is a common activity at this stage. It is a short course on any topic with academic reading, lectures, writing assignments, reports, presentations, tests, quizzes etc. Learners are capable of functioning in all skills.

The learners are also provided with an opportunity to learn something outside the programme. There is an Elective Hour which is completely independent from the modules. Any topic or activity, the learners are interested in, can be an elective (e.g. vocabulary development, pronunciation).

The reassessment in learners' current skill is taken regularly. If the learners are successful, they are advanced upon placing out of this skill module and go on to the next one. If the learners are not ready to move ahead, they remain in their current skill module for improvement and this time the teacher uses the other authentic material, so the learners don't have to repeat anything.

Литература

1. Hastings, A. (1995). The FOCAL SKILLS Approach: An assessment. In F. R. Eckman, D. Highland, P. W. Lee, J. Mileham, & R. R. Weber (Eds.), Second

Language Acquisition: Theory and Pedagogy (29-44). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2. Murphy, B. (1997). Evaluation of the Focal Skills Pilot ESL Program at Golden West College, 1993-94, ERIC# ED372815: A Research Report for WATESOL NEWS. WATESOL News, February 1997. Retrieved from <http://focalskills.info/articles/murphyreview.html>.
3. Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (1999). Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Yule, G. (2010). The study of language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Jan Zaniewski, Natallia Nizhneva, Nadzeya Nizhneva-Ksenafontava Проблемы обучения взрослых иностранным языкам Lingvodidactica. Том XVII, Bialystok 2013. 231-249.