



# Enhancing English Language Proficiency for Non-majored University Learners: A Proposal for Integrated Skills Approach Implementation

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**Abstract.** Despite more efforts from educational institutions to improve the teaching quality for non-English majors, learners' language proficiency in Vietnam is still problematic. Thus, finding a solution for teaching to upgrade their language proficiency is now an urgent action. Connecting four skills in an EFL classroom is considered an effective approach to enhancing learners' language achievement. This article provides a comprehensive theoretical basis for implementing an integrated skills approach in a Vietnamese EFL classroom. Specifically, the article first indicates the advantages of implementing the eclectic approach in one single lesson, followed by discussing the characteristics of the target approach, including the types of integration. The article then proposes the feasible procedure of merging skills into classes, namely the order of skills and the transition of skills, involving teaching tasks and activities for teachers to apply in a classroom. In addition, the teacher's and learners' roles in a classroom are discussed. Finally, a teaching testing and assessment covering four skills are mentioned.

**Keywords:** non-English-majored learners · integrated skills approach · English language proficiency · Vietnam

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, English language proficiency has been considered a standard to measure how successfully learners can use English to communicate [1]. It is regarded as an essential element for employment and further study. Hence, teaching English, which aims at enhancing English language proficiency, is of major concern to governments, universities, and lecturers [2]. The quality of English teaching in higher education in Vietnam is always a hot issue, constantly receiving discussion and debate from researchers and educators. The educational system has made many endeavors to promote English teaching and learning, but there is still much room for improvement, particularly regarding learners' proficiency levels [3]. It is noted that research investigating how effective teaching

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has been ample for English-majored learners, while for non-English majors, teaching has remained limited. Thus, there needs to be more exploration of pedagogical behaviors for ameliorating Vietnamese non-English majors' language performance.

Teaching general English to non-majored learners in higher education in Vietnam still has existed some weaknesses. In reality, the traditional methods, particularly the grammar-translation approach, are still dominantly used in an English classroom [4]. Learners mostly play the role of passive knowledge receivers, yet teachers always play the role of knowledge transmitters. Learners are not given many opportunities to internalize the target language. Furthermore, four skills are usually taught in isolation [5], with only one or two skills used to express ideas. This teaching style hampers learners' holistic language proficiency. Consequently, these Vietnamese learners' English language ability remains quite low. Especially, despite possessing good linguistic knowledge, the learners' communicative competence is always underestimated [6]. Learners are unable to listen to comprehend, read to get the main information, use English to make sentences, or speak in public. When leaving universities, graduates struggle with applying their English ability for work or high education.

The integrated teaching approach stemmed from the early 1900s but received little attention. It has emerged as a modern approach in educational programs in recent years. It is in harmony with the teaching process, comprehensively developing learners' English proficiency. Specifically, it combines language knowledge and skills into a single lesson, which helps learners easily attain, consolidate, and minimize repeated knowledge.

Integrating skills into one lesson shows many advantages for teachers to apply in an EFL classroom [7]. Firstly, combining more than one skill in the lesson provides learners with input knowledge to produce their output. Learners have opportunities to use multiple skills concurrently; for example, learners read to get ideas to speak or write. Besides, the integrated skills approach helps learners actively engage in classroom activities. In reality, learners are formed in pairs or groups to work with peers to present ideas, explain problems, or suggest solutions.

This article purposely reviews the theoretical basis for implementing an integrated skills approach in an EFL classroom. It begins with presenting (1) the advantages of implementing the integrated skills approach in one lesson, followed by (2) the characteristics of the integrated skills approach, and then discusses (3) the procedure of merging skills into classes along with (4) teaching tasks and activities for teachers to apply in a classroom. Finally, (5) a teaching assessment covering four skills is mentioned.

## **2 Theoretical Basis**

### **2.1 The Advantages of Implementing the Integrated Skills Approach**

Implementing an integrated skills approach in an English classroom brings more merits for both teachers and learners. According to [8] and [9], learners have more exposure to a comprehensive learning environment when engaging in skills-integrated activities. Learners interact with teachers and peers by "giving" and "receiving" communication messages. By practicing one skill, learners can "invite" other relevant skills if they are included in the same unit. Even teachers can incorporate four skills and focus on one in-depth skill. For example, the teachers can teach speaking by topics and integrate other

skills like listening, reading, and writing without losing concentration on speaking [10]. Secondly, this approach also provides learners with more chances to develop topical knowledge in depth and breadth. It means learners make use of skills to address a problem or a situation. Interconnecting skills into one lesson helps learners attain language knowledge and apply it to communicative situations naturally [11]. Thirdly, teaching integrated skills pays more attention to content than form. In other words, it emphasizes fluency more than accuracy, facilitating learners to exchange ideas freely rather than memorizing the truth of language solely [12]. Besides, exposing learners to more authentic materials helps them build up more interaction with teachers and peers [13]. By participating in meaningful situations in a classroom, learners become more active and engaged in lessons. They gain more confidence and get more motivated to learn [7].

As for teachers, an integrated approach supports teachers in many ways. First, this approach supports teachers in following learners' progress in four skills at the same time [14]. Second, teaching in an integrated mode saves time compared to teaching skills separately [12]. Third, according to [15], an integrated approach helps teachers renew their minds about the process of teaching, which is not only to memorize vocabulary, analyze grammatical structures, or translate vocabulary but to help learners use it to communicate in specific contexts [16]. Finally, this approach helps teachers revisit their roles in the classroom. Teachers cannot be the central people in a classroom to deliver knowledge. They provide learners with instructions and design lessons by letting learners cooperate with peers [12].

## **2.2 The Traits of the Integrated Skills Approach**

There are two forms of integrated skills approach, including (1) content-based instruction; (2) tasks-based instruction.

### **Content-Based Instruction**

Learners practice all four language skills in a communicative and integrative fashion. Content-based teaching is applied to all levels of English language proficiency, but the nature of this teaching style could vary depending on learners' level [17]. In essence, content-based instruction focuses on the unit's content through languages. For example, as for learners at the beginning level, the content aims at communication skills with personal information and social interaction. However, for learners at a higher level, the content becomes more academic and complex. The suggestions for choosing content for teaching are (1) concepts, or terminologies should be true, remaining unchanged through time; (2) the older information could be accepted, but through time it gains more updated and becomes trendy, which attracts more discussion from learners; (3) the input should have a humorous factor, helping reduce learners' anxiety; (4) content should not perform difficulties for learners to understand [19].

### **Tasks-Based Instruction**

Tasks-based teaching is broadly regarded as a comprehensive approach. Learners learn languages as an overall rather than as separated components. The tasks consist of four language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Tasks-based teaching places high emphasis on tasks that require learners to use English to speak or write.

This approach encourages learners to work in pairs or small groups to facilitate dual interaction. Collaborative learning is recommended in tasks-based teaching. Teaching via tasks is used with all levels of English language proficiency, and the tasks are presented in two forms: tasks in one-way interaction and tasks in two-way one [19]. With tasks in one-way interaction, an individual, either teacher or learners, has information and then shares it with the other learners in a classroom. In contrast, with those in a two-way interaction, all learners actively exchange information and share it with other peers to address the problem [20]. The vital factor for tasks is flexibility. One set of activities must be chosen by teachers and relevant to real life and the learners' characteristics. The choice of tasks should be specified, such as how learners work with input.

## 2.3 The Procedure of Merging Skills into Lessons

### Teaching Receptive Skills

Teaching listening and reading skills is a process of learners receiving information. Learners are readers and audiences to achieve specific listening skills and reading skills to get the main ideas. The teacher's role is to instruct learners in these skills to help them comprehend the information they listen to and read. According to [21], the teaching model for receptive skills includes five main stages.

- (1) **Lead-in:** The teacher prepares activities to get learners to guess the topic of a reading or listening text and stimulate their interest in the topic. The teacher's responsibility is to help learners activate their prior knowledge about the topic. The teacher helps learners to guess the content of listening or reading tasks through the clues such as pictures, titles, or short descriptions. This enables them to get the overall picture of the topic and self-reflect to make the questions for them.
- (2) **Teacher directs comprehension task:** The teacher instructs learners to understand the activities, such as responding to the questions, filling in the tables, filling out the passage, or reporting the content they listen to or read. This is the stage teacher needs to explain and get learners from an overall to a specific view by specifying the objective of listening or reading.
- (3) **Learners read or listen for the task:** The teacher organizes activities for learners to listen to or read. The teacher forms learners in pairs or small groups, bringing them more opportunities to discuss and interact with each other.
- (4) **Teacher directs feedback:** After finishing the tasks in class, the teacher checks the extent to which learners complete the tasks and indicates learners' strengths and weaknesses. The teacher conducts this activity in small groups to observe each instead of implementing it with the whole class. The learners exchange their products and check the answer together.
- (5) **Teacher directs related tasks:** The teacher conducts the activities related to the lesson, such as responding the questions about the content of the unit or focusing on some aspects of the linguistics of the lesson. This helps the student gain an in-depth understanding of the lesson.

### ***Teaching Reading***

Reading skill is a process of achieving, comprehending, and getting information from reading passages. Reading is also a process of decoding reading passages interactively, purposefully, critically, and analytically [23]. The integrated skills approach does not view reading as a solely passive skill [22].

Reading is universally split into two main types extensive and intensive reading. Extensive reading serves relaxing purposes, so learners can choose books, magazines, or interesting topics to read. On the other hand, intensive reading is likely to be more important, for it challenges teachers to have a specific plan for selecting materials and providing instructions, teaching activities, and references [24]. The teacher plays an important role as an organizer, observer, and feedback provider. The teacher helps learners understand the information and does not focus on unimportant details, such as analyzing word by word. The teacher should be flexible about various teaching techniques to assist learners in understanding the content of reading passages well.

Some teaching activities should be organized in a reading class, such as activating prior knowledge, predicting, and using linkers as well. First, the teacher establishes activities to activate the prior knowledge to attract learners to some information about the topic. Brainstorming and mind-map are useful for doing this step. Whereas brainstorming helps learners get ideas easily, mind-map helps learners systematize ideas. Both those techniques help learners stimulate the vocabulary of the reading passages. Secondly, the teacher organizes predicting activities by eliciting learners to look at the titles, pictures, and phrases that appeared in the reading passages to guess the content of the unit. Next, the teacher organizes activities using linking verbs by indicating the signal to conclude the structure of the reading passage and predict the following information.

Besides, the teacher can instruct learners to use scanning techniques to look for details and skimming techniques to get the overall information. Learners complete the reading task and then express their opinion based on the content of the reading passage, such as expressing agreement or disagreement, raising questions for themselves, comparing with their previous knowledge, or predicting the future based on some reading clues.

### ***Teaching Listening***

Listening is a process of interaction that requires learners to actively listen to memorize information in a short time and deliver information at the same time [25]. Learners have to distinguish the sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, and share information with peers [26]. Listening consists of four chief stages: receiving information, building up information, cooperating to address information, and conveying information.

Like reading skills, [21] divided listening into two types extensive and intensive listening. Extensive listening could be listening to CD, MP3, or on the Internet, where learners can listen for entertainment. On the other hand, intensive learning usually takes place in a classroom with the teacher's support for learners to understand the content.

Teachers conduct listening activities through three stages, including pre-, while-, and post-listening. In the initial stage, the teacher sets up activities to trigger learners' prior knowledge and determines the purpose of listening. Teaching activities include a topic discussion, brainstorming, vocabulary presentation, and relevant information sharing. While listening, the teacher conducts activities directly related to the content

of listening; for instance, listening to get the main ideas and to get details. In the final stage, the teacher integrates listening tasks into other skills like speaking or writing; for example, the teacher can ask learners to write a report.

### **Teaching Productive Skills**

Speaking and writing are considered active skills. Learners need to present languages through spoken or written communication. Speaking requires learners to own great ideas or deep topical knowledge to communicate. Writing requires learners to possess the ability to present their product clearly and consistently [27]. The important factor contributing to this success is the teacher's instruction by designing teaching activities [21].

Like organizing teaching activities with receptive skills, [21] proposed the process of teaching productive skills through five stages, namely (1) lead-in; (2) teacher sets the task; (3) teacher monitors the task; (4) teacher gives task feedback; (5) Task-related follow-up.

- (1) **Lead-in:** The teacher provides instructions and clues for learners to guess the topics by raising questions about personal experiences.
- (2) **Teacher sets the task:** The teacher explains the mission learners have to complete and ensures they understand the tasks. The teacher plays as a model repeating the instructions. S(he) can enact activities either in pairs or groups.
- (3) **Teacher monitors the task:** During the time learners get involved in learning activities, the teacher manages a classroom, supports learners by listening to their product presentation, and providing assistance when necessary.
- (4) **Teacher gives task feedback:** After learners complete the tasks, the teacher should indicate their strengths and weaknesses to help them improve and edit their product.
- (5) **Task-related follow-up:** Like organizing teaching activities with listening and reading, the teacher implements activities related to the content of the unit. The tasks can relate to the content of the unit or focus on some aspects of languages. The learners, therefore, have chances to attain their knowledge better.

### **Teaching Speaking**

Speaking is a complex skill because it requires learners to do many tasks at the same time, like selecting ideas, thinking of sensible vocabulary, and accurate pronunciation. According to [28], the teacher must help learners balance accuracy and fluency. Three key stages for conducting speaking classes are:

In the pre-speaking stage: The teacher provides learners with ideas through learning reading skills to get vocabulary or ideas and stimulate them to think about the topic.

In the while-speaking stage: The teacher forms learners in pairs or groups, giving learners opportunities to use English to not only respond to the questions but also raise the questions at the same time. Learners learn from each other and reduce learning anxiety. Making mistakes and learning from them is a natural process of learning a language. Some activities are suggested with teaching speaking like providing learners ideas through role cards with elicited ideas and suggestions. The other teaching activities are role-play, task fill-in completion, group discussion, interview, or debate.

In the post-speaking stage: The teacher gives feedback on learners' presentations. The teacher should not interrupt learners' speaking because it could affect their fluency [29]. Follow-up activities are normally conducted through writing skills.

### ***Teaching Writing***

Writing is the final skill in language learning and appears to be the most difficult of the four because it requires learners to generate ideas, organize them, and decode these ideas into legible texts [30]. To write well, it is necessary to understand the basic system of a language, which includes knowledge of grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and sentence structure.

There is no correct answer for the best teaching methods of writing. However, there are two well-known types of writing instruction: the controlled-to-free and free-writing approaches. In writing, the control-to-free approach is sequential. Learners are given sentence exercises first, followed by paragraphs to copy or manipulate grammatically. It emphasizes three aspects of syntax, grammar, and mechanics, with a heavy focus on precision over fluency. The free-writing method places more emphasis on quantity than quality. The teacher assigns large amounts of free writing on specific topics, with only minor error corrections.

[31] suggests teaching writing within three sub-processes, namely (1) planning; (2) generation of writing; and (3) revision.

First, learners will plan to present the abstract as the result of the writer's search for ideas and information in his memory. This presentation contains a more or less detailed specification of the text that they wish to write.

Second, during the generation writing stage, learners start generating ideas and organizing them into coherent and meaningful sentences. Learners must convert semantic input into written linguistic sequences. Cohesion, coherence, adequacy, and intelligibility should all be considered.

Last, the revision process involves improving and refining the advances and copies. These sub-processes do not necessarily occur in a sequential form but may appear during the writing simultaneously, cyclically, or recursively. Learners should reread and correct any errors.

### **The Interrelationship Among Four Skills**

#### ***Listening and Reading***

Listening and reading are receptive skills, but listeners and readers do not receive information passively. By contrast, listeners and readers receive information actively by linking information with each other with prediction, experience, and knowledge activation [32]. Learning these two skills is not only the comprehension of the surface but also deep understanding. Hence, listening and reading support each other mutually.

#### ***Speaking and Writing***

Speaking and writing are closely linked to each other. Speaking activates writing indirectly [32]. Writing improvement does not merely rely on the development of writing; the learners' speaking acquisition can simultaneously enhance writing performance. Thus, the better of these two skills are the result of operation and support. Furthermore, receptive skills are the root of sharpening productive skills. Until learners develop listening

and reading skills through practice, they gain more confidence to speak under any circumstance. No listening skill happens without speaking [28]. Similarly, no reading skill happens without reading. Above all, four language skills always connect.

Not only do receptive and productive skills exist in close inner relationships but listening, speaking, reading, and writing are also interconnected.

### ***Listening and Speaking***

Listening and speaking display a continued and close linkage with each other [32]. It means learners learn speaking through listening. They are able to express their ideas only when they understand the content they listen to. This is an important bridge to indicate their better listening. Learners can understand the content easily by speaking fluently.

### ***Reading and Writing***

Reading and writing support each other. Both reading and writing depend on each other to develop knowledge. Writers and readers make use of their knowledge of linguistics, topics, and organization [33]. These factors might help writers foster the ability to read and readers to nurture the ability to write.

To conclude, the four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, have a close relationship with each other, supporting each other. Learners can use more than one skill to study and work with peers. Figure 1 represents the model of integrating four skills into courses.

## **2.4 The Teaching Tasks and Activities for Teachers**

The following activities below are proposed for implementing an integrated skills approach in a lesson [35]. It is suggested that teachers need to pick up more than one activity below to manifest the use of all language skills at the same time so that the readers can grasp the role of this section.

- Debates: Learners will think in their heads, change their mindset when they support their opinions, and develop a clear and concise argument.
- Interviews: Learners will work with peers to perform an interview of each other on a topic of their choice. They can then show it in class.
- Role-play/Drama: Learners are given dominant roles and asked to act out specific scenes to the texts from novels, poems, or plays. They can even write and perform their script in front of the class.
- Class discussion: Learners work in pairs or groups to discuss and then present their short oral reports based on the topic they heard or read in the unit of the lesson. They should be persuasive and show critical thought.
- Group mini-lectures: Learners go through the texts they have previously read. They are then asked to give short talks on the content they had read. They are free to speak in front of their group.
- Written dictation/Note-taking: It is used as a reproduction stage when listening and writing skills are being exercised at once. Listening reinforces writing practice and, conversely, Learners' writing will be fortified by listening to correctly write or complete the sentences.



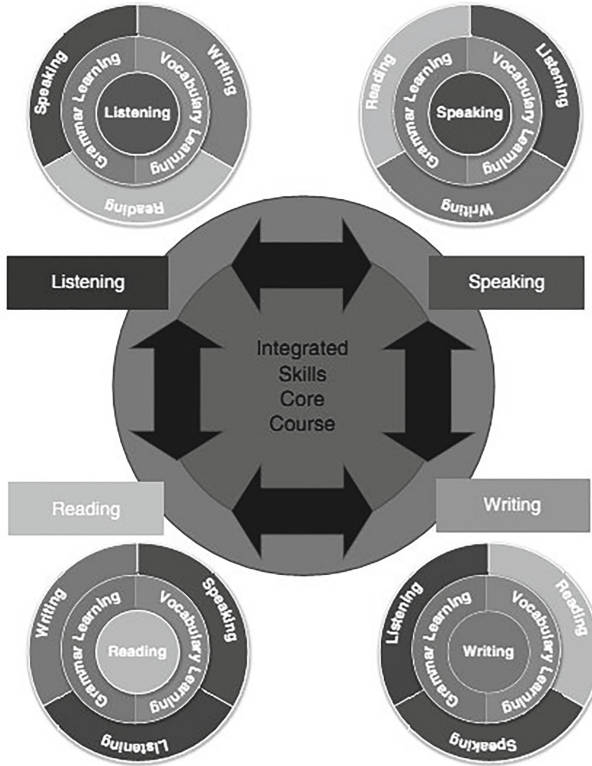


Fig. 1. Integrated four skills model. Note. Source: [34]

Besides, other activities are also suggested for teachers to apply to their integrated skills approach classes, like making posters, writing summaries or reviews, surveys and questionnaires, and information-gap and transfer.

### 2.5 Teachers’ and Learners’ Roles in Teaching Integrated Skills

Unlike a traditional approach, teaching English under the integrated approach requires teachers to provide learners with opportunities to discover and create new knowledge during the learning process. Teachers organize activities guiding learners to raise questions, participate in problem-solving activities, and share their thought through speaking and writing. Besides, teachers must trust learners’ abilities, show respect, and motivate them to get actively involved in learning activities. The teachers play a central role as managers, organizers, facilitators, and evaluators [36].

Also, learners need to show their active roles in this approach-driven classroom. They learn to communicate and spend more time on interactional patterns. This is a two-way interaction between a speaker and a listener, a reader and writer. They collaborate to

exchange ideas, knowledge, or information. They participate in group discussion activities to express their ideas, persuade their group members, and indicate their weaknesses. To conclude, learners should also act as managers who control learning by themselves [37].

## 2.6 The Language Testing and Assessment

Assessing learners' learning outcomes is a process of commenting on their levels and ability to meet the teaching goals. This results in determining both strengths and weaknesses of teaching and proposing solutions to improving teaching.

Assessing learners' language proficiency in an integrated way is quite challenging for teachers because all skills are simultaneously assessed. Each learner's skills are different in terms of levels and skill types. Some learners may perform speaking better than writing, and so on. Therefore, to assess learners' performance precisely, the teachers should collaborate intensively and extensively and track learners' progress to design proficiency tests more accurately [38].

Integrative assessment is now a potential solution for managers or lecturers to measure learners' overall general proficiency and communicative competence. Proficiency is determined as competence to achieve multi-faceted linguistic and communicative elements. The language proficiency test must be consistent to the teaching approach of integrated instruction [39]. It should be an integrative test involving vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, or it could be integrated listening and writing together.

## 3 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The current paper has just presented theoretical fundamentals to develop English language proficiency for teaching non-majored learners. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are closely linked and mutually supported in real-life scenarios. The improvement of the whole skill relies much on a flexible combination of elements of the system theory of learning. Listening is the basement for speaking, and reading is a source for listening. Listening and speaking facilitate reading and writing, and vice versa. These four skills should be organically connected to ensure the teaching process becomes integrated and comprehensive with "less time, more efficiency." However, this is only the first step to building up the system of theory. A practical study should be further conducted to testify to this theoretical basis. The teaching model could be generalized to other populations and contexts if the study shows positive results.

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