VIDEO IN TEACHING READING FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES: INTEGRATED-SKILLS APPROACH

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Abstract

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The paper provides practical suggestions for organizing reading instruction in a course of English for students of Business and Economics. The instruction is based on the integrated-skills approach, and video is used as one of the principal technological tools employed at the pre-reading stage for implementing this approach. It serves both for stimulating reading and as an introduction to the themes and contents of the texts to be read.

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Introduction

Reading English for business purposes as a separate skill rarely interests students of Business English in Ukraine. Special surveys done by one of the authors of this article in 1991/1992 and 1996/1997 (Tarnopolsky, 2000) demonstrated that potential Business English learners were primarily concerned with speaking and listening skills which they required for conducting business talks and negotiations. If they needed skills of reading and writing for business purposes, those were of secondary importance to them in comparison with speaking and listening. On the other hand, as shown by the data of 1996/1997 survey, though the trend towards mastering oral communication as the primary learning goal did not change with time, more and more students gradually became interested in reading and writing as their secondary objectives. For instance, if in 1991/1992 fifty nine per cent of 300 interviewees were not interested in mastering reading and writing skills in English at all, by 1996/1997 the situation changed. Out of 225 interviewees, 191 (85 per cent) wanted all the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, though the preference and primary importance of oral communication skills for most of potential learners remained unchanged (Tarnopolsky, 2000: 214).

This perspective of learners' needs necessitates a specific approach to reading instruction (as well as to writing instruction). Both reading and writing have to be integrated into the structure of the course primarily oriented at developing learners' reading and listening skills. It requires the introduction of the integrated-skills approach (Oxford, 2001) where all the skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are developed interconnectedly and interdependently. The development of every single skill is not separated from the development of all the other skills. They are all developed in unison so that speaking and listening stimulate reading and writing, reading and listening supply material and information for speaking and writing and support them, while speaking and writing reinforce the language material to be used for further development of reading and listening skills. Such an approach, with overt predominance of speaking and listening but hidden focus on reading, was developed for Ukrainian students of Business English and is described in this article. (In the approach under discussion writing was considered as a secondary and supporting skill used mainly for reinforcement of other skills being developed. It was due to the data obtained in the surveys mentioned above which demonstrated that writing was the skill least attractive to potential learners of Business English). Central for implementing the approach was the use of video as a starting point and basic stimulus for all the other learning activities, and from that point of view the approach may be called video-based.

Video as a Technological Tool for Developing Reading Skills.

Video has long been used in the classroom as an important tool for teaching listening and speaking. In recent years combining video with IT – information technology (computer-based *streaming audio and video*) – is being developed. It allows to transport virtually the target language environment into the classroom so that live or pre-recorded news, music, sports from all over the world can be viewed on students' computers in real time (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1997).

The main advantage of using video as a technology for language teaching is considered to be its ability to present and immerse learners into complete communicative situations (Lonergan, 1984). Another greatest advantage for teaching oral communication is the ability of video to cover non-verbal aspects of communication and its cross-cultural comparison potential (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). It may be said that video is the best means of demonstrating native speakers' natural fluent communication and their natural *behavior* in the process of communication. Learners can not only hear how native speakers speak, they can observe and learn how they *behave* when speaking.

That naturally makes video irreplaceable for teaching speaking and listening, i.e., for learning how to communicate orally. It gives materials for oral communication because learners may brainstorm and discuss what they have seen and heard, role-play it, enact it, develop and transform it in their own speaking, etc. They can do that in pair intercourse, small group communication, whole-class discussions actively involving everyone present in the classroom. The observed native-speakers' behavior may be imitated in such communication so that cultural components of communicative competence are acquired together with its linguistic components.

But video has one more advantage that makes its usable not only for developing speaking and listening skills but also for stimulating the development of reading and writing. Video has a great *motivational* potential (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). It stimulates students' communication which *follows* viewing, but it is not necessarily *oral* communication only. It is admitted by all specialists writing about the use of video in the language classroom that viewing video fragments stimulates learners' desire of talking about what they have seen (Lonergan, 1984; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). We assumed that, if video fragments for viewing were properly selected, they might stimulate Business English learners' desire of *reading* about the content matter of what had been viewed – with the aim of having more information about that content matter. This motivational potential of video, which seemed quite plausible, was considered to be of great importance in the conditions under discussion when students considered reading as a skill of secondary importance in comparison with speaking and listening. At any rate, it was worth trying to see if the potential was really there and if it was, to use it for stimulating the acquisition of reading skills by our students. A specific procedure of reading skill instruction, or rather *lesson plans with hidden focus on reading*, were developed for this purpose.

The Procedure of Reading Skill Instruction (an Integrated-Skills Lesson Plans with Hidden Focus on Reading)

The procedure in question has already been described in greater details elsewhere (Tarnopolsky & Degtiariova, 1999), so in this paper only the general lesson plans are given. Classes where those lesson plans are implemented are designed for developing all the four communication skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) on the basis of the already mentioned integrated-skills approach. For the teacher the focus is on reading which is central among all the activities done in class. But this focus is hidden from the students for whom learning is organized in such a way that they view reading only as a means of obtaining information for speaking or for summarizing and putting in order the information obtained from listening. – the activities that they believe to be really important for themselves. Thus, learners consider reading as a supplementary activity, something either leading to oral communication or summarizing and supporting it. Writing within the procedure may be viewed in the same light – as a cover-all summarizing activity, supplementary to speaking and listening and supporting them.

The procedure itself consists of a number of interrelated components.

The pre-reading stage:
1. *Introducing learners to the topic (theme) of one or several texts to be read*, i.e., introducing the subject matter to stimulate interest in it, the desire to know more about it, as well as to make it easier for comprehension – following the recommendations of the sheltered English approach (Freeman, 2000). This goal is achieved by viewing video fragments and video episodes, parts of video courses, etc. Different video materials developed and produced in the USA and the UK are used for this purpose. They include video courses like *Oxford Business English Skills; BBC Business English Portfolio, American Business English*, and *Business News* recorded from the BBC TV program *Business World*, as well as other video materials.
2. *Discussing what was viewed and sharing ideas*. Discussions are organized as recommended in Ur (1992) – in pairs, small groups, and as whole-class ones. They are aimed not only at checking comprehension but primarily at eliciting students' background knowledge and their arriving at some new ideas and conclusions in the process of exchanging information and opinions.

The reading stage:
1. *Reading of one and the same text by all the students.* This is followed by discussions conducted either in small groups or as whole-class ones (teacher-fronted). The purpose of discussions is not only clarifying some points in the text read, checking its comprehension, and eliciting learners' personal opinions. The main goal is students' comparing information obtained from the text with 1) the information that they learned while viewing the video; 2) their personal background knowledge formulated in the preceding discussion (see above).
2. *Reading of different texts by different students.* Those texts are different in contents but deal with the same topic (theme) as the first text. It should be noted that all kinds of texts selected for reading are mostly authentic. They may be samples of business letters, contracts, and other business documents taken from different sources (for example, authentic business letters, contracts, and agreements, annual reports of corporations, etc). Those samples were mostly collected by one of the authors of this paper during his stay in the USA. One more source is business newspapers, magazines, and journals (e.g. *Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, The Economist*).
3. *Exchanging information obtained from individual texts just read.* The work may be done in pairs or in small groups of 3-4 students. Every student tells his/her partner(s) about the content matter of the text read and answers questions. This is followed by a discussion aimed at comparing all the information obtained while reading, viewing the video, and listening to other students. The discussion may be held in small groups but most often it is organized as a whole-class one.

The post-reading stage:
1. *Simulation(s) organized and carried out on the basis of information obtained from the preceding reading, viewing, listening, and discussing.* For instance, if those focused on the issues of budgeting, an Executive Board meeting may be simulated. The agenda of the meeting is discussing an imaginary company's budget for the year to come. Simulations may be organized as whole-class ones or held in small groups.
2. *Writing an essay or some kind of business document* (a business letter, a contract, etc.). This is a summarizing activity done by students individually and mostly out of class. The written papers are exchanged for peer-reviewing and discussing (in class), and only after they are discussed by students themselves, they are handed in to the teacher for his/her commenting.

All the activities belonging to the procedure described above usually take more than one class of 80-90 minutes. They may be completed in two or three classes, depending on the situation, the pace of students' work, and other factors.

The Use of the Procedure in Teaching Practice

A practical illustration of the teaching procedure just described can be given using as an example the topic (theme) '*Business contracts and agreements*'.

At *the pre-reading stage* students start by viewing several fragments from *BBC Business English Portfolio* (Units 17-19) where the topic of communication is business contracts and agreements. Depending on how many fragments are watched, viewing may take from a quarter of an hour to half an hour. Discussing what has just been viewed and sharing ideas begins immediately after viewing. Students work in groups of three or four, and the aim of their discussion is to brainstorm and formulate what should be included into a written business contract or agreement. They discuss the same agreements which were the subject matter of negotiations in the video fragments, and make some conclusions concerning the structure of written agreements of similar types, their parts and sections, the clauses that should be there, and the reasons underlying inclusion or exclusion of certain clauses. They have to make guesses as to the ways of formulating different clauses in writing, etc. If several students in class have some background knowledge of the subject being discussed (have read some written business contracts and agreements, have read or heard something about the ways of writing them, etc.), they are assigned to different small groups so that they could share their knowledge and ideas with the others. After the discussion (15-20 minutes), each small group reports their ideas to the whole class and different ideas are compared as to their plausibility.

At the reading stage students read the text of an authentic business agreement of the type similar to the one negotiated in the video fragments viewed at the beginning of the class. All the students in class read one and the same text for about 10 minutes. After that, the whole-class discussion is held for clarifying unclear points (with the teacher's help). What the text of the agreement really has is compared to what the students guessed (at the pre-reading stage) it had to have. The formulation of clauses earlier suggested by the students is compared to their actual formulation. The first class on this topic ends with this discussion.

The next class begins with *continuation of reading*, but this time every student reads a different text – different business contracts and agreements which are not alike to the one read and discussed before. The goal is making students familiarized with different kinds of written business agreements. After reading, students work in pairs and share the information they elicited from their respective texts. Special attention is paid to comparing the differences and finding similarities in different kinds of business contracts and agreements. Finally, each pair reports the results of their discussion to the class, and in the whole-class discussion students arrive at definite conclusions as to the structure of business contracts and agreements, their language and style, the similarities and differences of contracts and agreements of different type.

At the post-reading stage students (in pairs or groups of four) simulate talks between businessmen negotiating a future contract or agreement. The simulation is based on the text of one of the agreements just read. The class is finished with a written task which the students are requested to do at home. They are supposed to write a business contract or agreement themselves. For this purpose, the teacher distributes assignment cards with some initial information required for compiling the document (what the agreement is about, who the 'sides' in the agreement are, some of its terms, etc.). Students are requested to bring their completed written pieces to the next class and to hand them in for peer-reviewing and peer-critique. With that the class is over, and the next class starts with a new topic (theme).

The Pilot Study (Method and Results)

The pilot study to check the efficiency of the suggested approach was conducted in the spring semester of 1997/1998 academic year (February-June 1998, four month) at Dnipropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport. The subjects were second year students of the Department of Economics learning English for Business and Economics. Four groups of students took part in the pilot study with 13 students in each group.

The groups were equalized as to students' age (18-19 years old, with nobody younger or older), male-female ratio (60-62% females, 38-40% males in every group), and the initial level of learners' reading skills development. A pre-test in reading was administered at the beginning of the spring semester to determine that level. Students were requested to read a short (398 words) and rather simple (as to language and content) text on the state of Ukrainian economy and answer 10 comprehension questions. The mean results were quite similar in all the groups. In the first group (further called 'group A1') the mean number of correct answers to 10 questions was 4.9. In the second group (further called 'group A2') it was 5.0. In the third group ('B' further in this article) it was 5.3, and in the fourth group ('C') the mean number of correct answers was 5.1.

Before participating in the pilot study, all students learned English in their secondary schools and after that, for a year and a half at the university (identical programs both during the school and the university years). In the first year of studies at the university they were learning General English – speaking, listening, and reading (writing was not taught), with speaking and listening in the focus of attention. In the second (final) year of their studies of English the attention was focused on English for Business and Economics with the greatest efforts invested into teaching reading and writing skills. But as it can be seen from the pre-test results above, teaching reading was not a great success.

All the groups were in absolutely equal conditions of learning. Both during their first and second year at the university they had their classes of English two times a week, two hours (90 minutes) for every class. In what concerns teaching reading both before the pilot study and during it, the same materials for reading were used in all the groups. What was different in the period of pilot study was the method of teaching.

In groups A1 and A2 it was as described earlier, i.e., the procedure including using video as one of its components. In group B the procedure was the same except one element. Video was not used at the pre-reading stage. Instead, teacher talked about the subject matter of the text to be read giving students some ideas about that subject matter (Freeman & Freeman, 1991). Audio texts were also used as a substitute for video. In all the other aspects and at all the other stages the procedure remained unchanged. In group C the method of teaching reading characteristic of the methodology spread in the former Soviet Union (and still being used now at many schools and universities) was used. Students read the texts given to them and, after reading, either retold their contents or answered the teacher's questions about that contents. Translations of parts of the texts or of entire texts into L1 were also often done orally or in writing. There were no discussions, brainstorming, simulations, reading individual texts, and exchanging information about them, no writing essays on the subject matter of what has been read (though summaries of the texts read were written from time to time), etc. It should be mentioned that it was in accordance with this method that the students of all the four groups had been taught reading before the pilot study.

At the end of the semester during which the pilot study was being conducted, the students of all the four groups had a reading test. In the test they read a text on the economy of the United Kingdom (about 750 words). The text was original and authentic, retrieved from the Internet at http://www.wikipedia.com/wiki/UK/Economy (the 1998 version of that text).

The students of each group had 12 minutes to read the text attentively and after that, they answered 10 comprehension questions in writing. The test text to be read was of a somewhat higher le vel of language difficulty than those texts ordinarily used in all the groups for teaching reading during the semester. It was also in a format unfamiliar to students. Those 'obstacles' were intentional. They helped to obtain information as to whether the reading skills developed in any of the groups were sufficient for enabling learners to comprehend texts which were more difficult in comparison with what they were used to.

The results of the test are shown in Table 1. The results of every student are given, as well as the mean figures, to make the picture clearer. Students' names in the table are encoded: the first letter in the code is the first letter of learner's last name, the second letter in the code is the first letter of his or her first name, and the last letter in the code is the first letter of his/her patronymic.

Table 1

Reading Test Results

Group A1		Group A2		Group B		Group C	
Student	Number of correct answers (out of 10)	Student	Number of correct answers (out of 10)	Student	Number of correct answers (out of 10)	Student	Number of correct answers (out of 10)
B.I.V.	0	B.A.A.	10	A.O.B.	6	A.M.K.	0
E.E.A.	10	B.V.V.	8	B.O.S.	8	A.S.V.	0
L.I.N.	8	D.N.A.	8	G.G.S.	7	E.N.V.	8
M.O.N.	10	D.S.I.	10	G.S.S.	8	F.O.F.	0
M.U.V.	10	F.N.I.	10	E.N.A.	7	G.T.F.	6
O.E.V.	10	F.T.I.	8	I.I.I.	6	K.T.A.	0
O.S.I.	10	G.I.V.	10	M.A.D.	10	L.V.S.	0
S.V.S.	10	G.L.I.	10	M.A.N.	10	N.V.V.	0
S.E.F.	7	K.E.V.	10	N.S.O.	7	O.I.V.	0
T.O.I.	10	L.I.N.	9	O.Z.O.	8	O.S.V.	6
Z.E.V.	8	M.A.N.	10	P.N.S.	10	R.I.V.	0
Z.O.V.	10	M.L.P.	8	S.E.N.	8	S.V.V.	7
Y.A.S.	10	S.O.V.	5	U.V.A.	7	U.T.S.	6
Mean	8.7	Mean	8.9	Mean	7.8	Mean	2.5

It can be seen from the data given in Table 1 that students from groups A1 and A2 were most successful in comprehending the test text. They surpassed by far students from groups B and C whose pre-test results had been better than theirs (though slightly). Their understanding of the test text, as demonstrated by correct answers to comprehension questions, was quite full. One student only in group A1 totally failed to understand it, and one student in group A2 understood correctly not more than half of it. The results in group B were high enough as well, though considerably lower than in groups A1 and A2. Finally, in group C the test was a complete failure. Two students only could give 7-8 correct answers to comprehension questions, and three students gave 6 correct answers. Eight students out of thirteen could not answer correctly even a single comprehension question.

All this means that the suggested procedure for teaching reading in English to students of Business and Economics seems to be quite adequate and efficient – much more so than the traditional approach to teaching reading used in the former Soviet Union (see the results of group C in Table 1). This procedure appears to be adequate and efficient enough even without video (see the results of group B in Table 1). But if video is used, the efficiency seems to have a tendency towards growing (see the results of groups A1 and A2 in the same table). It is most probably due to the motivational potential of video which contributes to enhancing students' interests in the materials to be read. That makes the conclusion about the expediency of using video in teaching reading *quite realistic.*

Naturally, this conclusion based on the results obtained in the pilot study cannot be considered as absolute. Conclusive evidence requires much greater number of students tested, their stricter selection, and stricter conditions of both teaching/learning and testing, so as to turn the pilot study into an experimental one. But the obtained results clearly show the tendency. Video in teaching reading in English does seem to tend to enhance learners' reading ability and the development of their reading skills. If it is so, it is worthwhile to try and introduce this technological tool into classroom reading practice which alone can and will give conclusive and final evidence as to its efficiency in the EFL area under discussion.

Conclusion

The article discusses the ways of developing a more effective procedure for teaching reading in English to students of Business and Economics, namely to those of such learners who are primarily interested in acquiring speaking and listening skills and consider reading to be of secondary importance. Video is recommended as a technological tool, beneficial both for enhancing students' interest in reading to follow the viewing and for contributing thereby to improvement in learners' reading skills development. The results of pilot study reported in the article seem to confirm the apparent benefits of video for teaching reading. That opens up some prospects for development in this direction. One possible development which can be suggested is combining the use of Internet for teaching reading with the advantages of computer-based *streamline video* (see the *Introduction* to this paper). Such a combination seems to be quite promising since it allows for broader use of multi-media technology in reading instruction.

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