An Integrated Approach: Four Skills, Not One and One Content, Not Four[1]

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the important roles that input, output, and interaction play in language development. After reviewing related literature, the paper explores an EFL classroom approach that seeks to engage the students in a combination of integrated activities, based on the same content, that together provide abundant and wide-ranging input as well as opportunities for output and interaction. The article then describes a survey of university students' perceptions of this approach, which was being applied in their classes. The survey investigated to what extent the students felt that each of the components – input, output, and interaction – helped to improve the performance and development of their language skills. The results of the study show that the students involved in the survey recognized the importance of all three components in developing their language proficiencies.

Resumen

Este artículo se refiere a las funciones importantes que desempeñan el caudal lingüístico (input), la producción lingüística (output) y la interacción en lo que respecta al desarrollo lingüístico. Después de revisar la literatura relacionada, el documento describe un enfoque en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL, por su siglas en inglés) que busca que los estudiantes participen en una combinación de actividades integradas, basadas en el mismo contenido, que en conjunto proporcionan un caudal lingüístico amplio y abundante, así como oportunidades para la **producción** lingüística y la interacción. Posteriormente, el artículo describe una encuesta sobre las percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios sobre este enfoque, que se estaba aplicando en sus clases. La encuesta investigó hasta qué punto los estudiantes consideraban que cada uno de los componentes – caudal lingüístico, producción lingüística e interacción – contribuía a mejorar el desempeño y el desarrollo de sus habilidades lingüísticas. Los resultados del estudio indican que los estudiantes que participaron en la encuesta reconocieron la importancia de los tres componentes en el desarrollo de sus conocimientos lingüísticos.

Background

Most recent SLA research shows that input, output, and interaction are all important to successful instructed language learning. The significance for teachers and course planners is that they should give appropriate consideration to all three features (Ellis, 2005; Lessard-Clouston, 2007).

As for input, Gass (1997) points out that "it is an incontrovertible fact that some sort of input is essential for language learning; clearly languages are not and cannot be learned in a vacuum" (p. 86). Maley (2009) stresses that the only reliable way to learn a language is through repeated exposure to large amounts of input in context.

With regards to output, Swain (1995) asserts that output in meaningful situations plays a vital role in language development. She explains that, as well as providing learners with opportunities for practice and helping them to improve their fluency, output serves the second language learning process in three important ways. It gives learners chances to: "notice (any gaps) between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say"; develop and test hypotheses about how the language works; and "reflect upon their own target language use" and "internalize (their) linguistic knowledge" (pp. 125-126).

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Having the opportunity to interact in the second language, says Ellis (2005), is also of central importance to developing L2 proficiency. He points out that both input and output occur in oral interaction, and he stresses that "interaction is not just a means of automatizing existing linguistic resources but also of creating new resources" (Ellis, 2005, p. 40). Language acquisition is promoted when the speakers have to negotiate for meaning and "interactional modifications" (Ellis, 2005, p. 40) are made. In fact, studies have found that modified interaction leads to higher levels of comprehension than modified input (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Although most SLA researchers now agree that L2 learners need exposure to input as well as opportunities for output and interaction in meaningful situations in order to make progress, there is a tendency with some of the more influential approaches to language teaching to focus on only one or two of these features. Proponents of Communicative Language Teaching and the Task-based Approach, for example, emphasize learning by doing and argue that learners learn a language by using it in meaningful communication (Richards, 2006). Typical courses based on these methodologies come down heavily on language output, interaction, and accomplishment of tasks (Swann, 2006).

On the other hand, the Natural Approach, as advocated by Krashen and Terrell, stresses the importance of input rather than output in language learning. Supporters of this approach claim that output should not be forced and students will produce language spontaneously after they have been exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Krashen, in Wang (2013) says that speaking and writing are not essential for learning to take place and learners will be able to learn a language without these components as long as there is sufficient comprehensible input; "More writing," he claims, "does not result in better writing," and "More speaking does not result in better speaking". (Wang, 2013, p. 26) However, he does concede that conversations can be helpful for the language learning process in that they provide input (Wang, 2013, p. 26).

While acknowledging the contribution and importance of the above-mentioned approaches to language teaching, some EFL scholars point out their limitations. Renandya (2013) suggests that courses that neglect input and emphasize output and interactive activities can lead to fossilization of errors and without a rich and varied input, students will reach a plateau of ability and cease to develop language competence. He argues that language programs must not neglect input activities and should provide an appropriate balance of input and output practice activities for L2 learners to engage in on a sustained basis. Swain, on the other hand, as mentioned in Kreß (2008), argues that it is important not to neglect output, as it is necessary to the language learning process. She points to empirical studies that were carried out in Canada and Japan, which show that language learning students who were not 'pushed' to perform output activities were unable to develop their speaking and writing abilities to the same extent as their reading and listening skills (Kreß, 2008). Other EFL experts stress the importance of interaction as well (Ellis, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Mackey & Gass, 2005). Ellis (2005) explains that courses that neglect to provide opportunities for interaction deprive students of a "primary source of learning" (p. 40).

One of the challenges facing language course planners, therefore, is to provide students with a well-balanced language program that recognizes the importance of language input as well as output and interaction practice. Ellis (2005) insists that any successful instructed language-learning program should include extensive L2 input, opportunities for output, and the opportunity to interact in the L2. Similarly, Nation (1996) and Swann (2006) stress that attention should be paid to both input and output when planning language programs. Nation (1996) recommends that teachers and course designers should avoid allying themselves too strongly with any one teaching approach and should

instead aim to create a language program which includes "four strands": meaning-focused listening and reading, language-focused instruction, meaning-focused speaking and writing, and fluency-development activities. Swann (2006) claims there are certain elements that are essential for any language-learning program: extensive input, intensive input, analyzed input, extensive output, intensive output, and analyzed output.

An Integrated Approach and the Research Questions

Although carried out in two different ways, the approach used in the classes attended by the students in this study sought to engage the students in a combination of classroom activities that together provided abundant and wide-ranging input as well as opportunities for output and interaction, and which involved all four language skills. As it occurs in real life usage, the practice of these skills was linked to or focused on the same content, thus allowing for the recycling of language. This was intended to provide repeated exposure to the input, increased opportunities for reinforcement, a greater understanding of the meaning and usage of the language, and an increased awareness of how the language is used in communication.

The initial activity involved the students reading either at home or in class. The reading material varied, and was chosen in one case by the students and the other by the teacher. In both cases, the hope was that the material was interesting to talk about and comprehensible. In countries where the target language is not widely used, reading can be one of the most comprehensible forms of input. Moreover, if learners develop the habit of reading extensively in their free time, they will brought into contact with far more input than classroom lessons can ever provide (Maley, 2009).

Another activity required the students to write down information and/or opinions and ideas related to the material they had read. Having the students write about a text can help them to gain a deeper understanding of it by encouraging them to move beyond focusing on individual elements and towards an understanding of overall themes. It also gives them chances to practice using vocabulary and expressions found in the text. In addition, writing can help students to prepare for a spoken discussion, giving them opportunities to clarify and organize the details as well as to reflect on their opinions and thoughts regarding the content. Writing down one's thoughts before speaking, can make a big difference in both the quality and quantity of the spoken language produced (Folse, 1996).

In other activities, the students talked about and discussed the material they had read with a partner or in groups. This was done without looking at what they had written in order to avoid simply reading aloud and to encourage real conversation. As well as providing speaking and listening practice, the discussions, provided opportunities for the students to actually use the vocabulary and expressions from the text. It also forced them to negotiate for meaning when they had trouble understanding or being understood.

Our basic research question concerned whether or not the students were able to perceive the benefits of this approach for the performance and development of their English language skills. Specifically, the questions investigated were as follows:

1. Did the students think that their understanding of the reading passages was helped by taking part in activities that involved other skills and were based on the same content area?
2. Did the students think that their performance in the discussions was helped by taking part in activities that involved other skills and were based on the same content area?

3. Did the students think that a combination of various skill-based activities helped them more in developing their receptive abilities than practice in only a single skill?
4. Did the students think that a combination of various skill-based activities helped them the more in developing their productive abilities than practice in only a single skill?

Methodology

The participants for this study were a convenience sample rather than a random sample of students enrolled in three university English classes in Japan. The anonymous ten-item questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered to those in attendance on that day; 19 of the 20 students enrolled in class A and 47 of the 50 students enrolled in classes B and C. The total number of participants was 66 students. Most students spent about ten minutes answering the questions. (Appendix B provides information about the students' basic level of English proficiency.)

Class A was taught at one university by a native English speaker, and classes B and C were taught at another university by another native English speaker. Class A was a mandatory one-semester reading class for second-year English language majors. It met twice a week for 90 minutes each, on Mondays and Thursdays. This was the seventeenth lesson of the semester, during the ninth week of the second semester. In the first 15-week semester, the students had taken a similar class, but were not all in the same section and were not taught by this teacher nor all by the same teacher. Besides this class, these students were taking three other required English classes during the semester and the school year; writing, speaking, and listening, each also meeting for 90 minutes twice a week.

Classes B and C were compulsory integrated-skills classes for these first-year students, who were not majoring in English. It was conducted for the entire school year, for two 15-week semesters with summer vacation in between. The classes met for 90 minutes once a week, on Wednesdays. This was the tenth lesson of the second semester; so, the twenty-fifth lesson of the school year. Eighty percent of these students had been in the same two sections of this class taught by this same teacher in the first semester. The other twenty percent had been in different sections taught by other teachers. In addition to this class, these students were enrolled in two other 90-minute, once-a-week, required English classes during each semester; one emphasizing listening and speaking and another emphasizing reading but including some writing. Most of these students were also taking at least one of a variety of other elective English classes, carried out according to the same weekly schedule. As classes B and C were taught following the same procedures and using the same materials, they will be considered together. (For details about the class activities, see Appendix C.)

Results and Discussion

In general, the students' responses to the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the students in both groups found the use of various language skills helpful in their use of and improvement in each individual language skill. The analysis focuses on the four specific research questions. In the tables, which provide details, percentages may not equal to 100 due to rounding. In the following tables these are the rankings that were used: 1 (I agree strongly), 2 (I agree), 3 (Maybe), or 4 (I do not agree).

1. Did the students think that their understanding of the reading passages was helped by taking part in activities that involved other skills and were based on the same content area?

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=19	7 37%	8 42%	4 21%	0 0%
B & C n=47	22 47%	20 43%	3 6%	2 4%

Table 1. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Having conversations helped me to understand what I had read

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=19	6 32%	8 42%	4 21%	1 5%
B & C n=47	12 26%	25 53%	9 19%	1 2%

Table 2. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Writing helped me to understand what I had read

In Table 1, we find that 79% of the students in class A (37%+42%) and 90% of the students in classes B and C (47%+43%) felt sure that having conversations helped them to understand what they had read, and only two students in classes B and C (4%) thought that this was definitely not so. Table 2 reveals that 74% of the students in class A (32%+42%) and 79% of the students in classes B and C (26%+53%) were certain that writing helped them to understand what they had read, with one student in each group, 5% and 2%, respectively, disagreeing. These results find the answer to the first question to be yes; the great majority of these students believed that having taken part in language-based activities other than reading, which were based on the same text, helped them to understand what they had read.

2. Did the students think that their performance in the discussions was helped by taking part in activities that involved other skills and were based on the same content area?

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=19	5 26%	10 53%	4 21%	0 0%
B & C n=47	29 62%	16 34%	2 4%	0 0%

Table 3. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Reading something before talking helped me to say more when I had conversations

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=19	6 32%	9 47%	4 21%	0 0%
B & C n=47	17 36%	15 32%	12 26%	3 6%

Table 4. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Writing something before talking helped me to say more when I had conversations

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=19	6 32%	9 47%	4 21%	0 0%
B & C n=47	28 60%	13 28%	6 13%	0 0%

Table 5. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Reading something before talking helped me to understand more of what my classmates said in the conversations

Class & Population	Rankings			
	1	2	3	4
A n=18*	7 39%	6 33%	5 28%	0 0%
B & C n=47	10 21%	20 43%	14 30%	3 6%

* One student did not respond to this item.

Table 6. Numbers of students who ranked the statement: Writing something before talking helped me to understand more of what my classmates said in the conversations

Table 3 shows us that 79% of the students in class A (26%+53%) and 96% of the students in classes B and C (62%+34%) thought that reading something before talking helped them to say more when engaged in conversations, while no students felt that this was definitely not the case. In Table 4, we see that 79% of the students in class A (32%+47%) and 68% of the students in classes B and C (36%+32%) believe that writing something before talking helped them to say more in their conversations, with only three students in classes B and C, 6%, disagreeing. Table 5 shows us that 79% of the students in class A (32%+47%) and 88% of the students in classes B and C (60%+28%) were sure that reading something before talking helped them to understand more of what their classmates said in conversations. Table 6 reveals that 72% of the students in class A (39%+33%) and 64% of the students in classes B and C (21%+43%) felt certain that writing something before talking helped them to understand more of what their classmates said during conversation, while three students in classes B and C (6%) disagreed. According to these results, the answer to the second question is also yes; a majority of these students thought that having taken part in language-based activities other than conversing, and which were related to the same material, helped them to perform better in their discussions. A much higher percentage of students in classes B and C agreed with this for reading (96% and 88%) than for writing (68% and 64%), whereas the percentages were almost the same for class A students (79% and 79% versus 79% and 72%). Perhaps this is because the students in classes B and C were given much more time for their reading than for their writing. The students in class A were provided similar amounts of time to do both.

3. Did the students think that a combination of various skill-based activities helped them more in developing their receptive abilities than practice in only a single skill?

Class	Skill or Combination of Skills						
	R	W	HC	R & W	R & HC	W & HC	R & W & HC
A n=19	7 37%	0 0%	0 0%	3 16%	3 16%	O 0%	6 32%
B & C n=47	6 13%	0 0%	3 6%	8 17%	19 40%	3 6%	8 17%

Table 7. Numbers of students who chose each skill, R, W, HC (reading, writing, having conversations), or combination of skills (R & W, R & HC, W & HC, R & W & HC) as the most helpful to them to become better at reading

Class	Skill or Combination of Skills						
	R	W	HC	R & W	R & HC	W & HC	R & W & HC
A n=19	1 5%	0 0%	12 63%	0 0%	1 5%	2 11%	3 16%
B & C n=47	1 2%	0 0%	20 43%	2 4%	14 30%	3 6%	7 15%

Table 8. Numbers of students who chose each skill, R, W, HC (reading, writing, having conversations), or combination of skills (R & W, R & HC, W & HC, R & W & HC) as the most helpful to them to become better at listening

Table 7 shows that 64% of the students in class A (16%+16%+32%) and 86% of the students in classes B and C (6%+17%+40%+6%+17%) thought that some combination of skills practice was more helpful for them to become better at reading than practicing reading alone, 37% and 13%, respectively. In Table 8, we find that 32% of the students in class A (5%+11%+16%) and 55% of the students in classes B and C (4%+30%+6%+15%) believed that practicing some combination of skills was more useful for improving their listening abilities than just having conversations, 63% and 43%, respectively. These results show that a majority of the students, a great majority of those in classes B and C (86%), felt that practicing a variety of language skills helped them more to develop their reading abilities than reading alone. The results concerning becoming better at listening are not as clear. As listening was almost always carried out in conversations, this skill was not a separate choice here. But, having conversations was not included when totaling the number of students who felt a combination of skills helped them to improve their listening. Still, a greater percentage of students in classes B and C (55%) thought that practicing a variety of other language skills was more helpful to them in developing their listening abilities than only having conversations (43%). The students in class A felt the opposite; 63% believed that having conversations helped them the most to become better at listening.

4. Did the students think that a combination of various skill-based activities helped them more in developing their productive abilities than practice in only a single skill?

Class	Skill or Combination of Skills						
	R	W	HC	R & W	R & HC	W & HC	R & W & HC
A n=19	0 0%	0 0%	11 58%	0 0%	3 16%	1 5%	4 21%
B & C n=47	0 0%	0 0%	19 40%	1 2%	10 21%	6 13%	11 23%

Table 9. Numbers of students who chose each skill, R, W, HC (reading, writing, having conversations), or combination of skills (R & W, R & HC, W & HC, R & W & HC) as the most helpful to them to become better at speaking

Class	Skill or Combination of Skills						
	R	W	HC	R & W	R & HC	W & HC	R & W & HC
A n=19	1 5%	6 32%	0 0%	9 47%	0 0%	1 5%	2 11%
B & C n=47	0 0%	9 19%	0 0%	28 60%	0 0%	6 13%	4 9%

Table 10. Numbers of students who chose each skill, R, W, HC (reading, writing, having conversations), or combination of skills (R & W, R & HC, W & HC, R & W & HC) as the most helpful to them to become better at writing

Table 9 shows us that 42% of the students in class A (16%+5%+21%) and 59% of the students in classes B and C (2%+21%+13%+23%) felt that practicing a combination of skills helped them to become better at speaking than only having conversations, 58% and 40%, respectively. Table 10 reveals that 63% of the students in class A

(47%+5%+11%) and 82% of the students in classes B and C (60%+13%+9%) thought that a combination of skills practice was more beneficial for becoming better at writing than only practicing writing, 32% and 19%, respectively. According to these results, a majority of the students, a strong majority of those in classes B and C (82%), felt that practicing a variety of language skills helped them more to develop their writing abilities than writing alone. The results concerning becoming better at speaking, as in the case of listening, are not as clear. As with listening, this may be because speaking was almost always carried out in discussions, which was not listed as a separate choice and was not included as a combination of skills, either. Yet, a greater percentage of students in classes B and C (59%) thought that practicing a variety of other language skills was more helpful to them in developing their speaking abilities than only having conversations (40%). Again, students in class A had the opposite opinion, with 58% feeling that having conversations helped them the most in becoming better at speaking.

Conclusion

In the English language teaching context of Japanese universities, English courses, other than those of English majors, are only a very small part of the curriculum. There are frequently only two English lessons a week, which are two separate courses and are sometimes only required of first-year students. The teacher therefore has a lot of choices to make to ensure efficient and effective use of the short learning time available.

Japanese university English courses are often separated by skills, or by combining the literate skills or the oral/aural skills. As in high school classes, lessons quite often focus on input and translation into Japanese, with very little output or interaction in English being required. So, for many of the students, the approach used in this study, which involved a balance of input, output, and interaction and an integration of all four skills, was new.

Our research questions attempted to ascertain if the students thought they had improved their English reading, writing, speaking, and/or listening through participation in a variety of language learning activities emphasizing each of these skills and based on the same reading passage. To a great extent, the students' responses to the questionnaire were that they did, which is extremely important as perception of improvement is likely to inspire motivation to continue studying and learning. They overwhelmingly believed that both having conversations and writing helped them to better understand what they had read and that both reading and writing helped them to both speak and understand more in conversations. They also strongly believed that practicing various skills helped them to improve both their reading and their writing more than if they had only practiced the single skills.

The only results that might be at variance with support for this approach concerned what students thought helped them most for the development of their oral/aural skills. As was mention earlier, this may have had to do with the wording of the questions. In any case, the majority of students in classes B and C still felt that practicing other skills along with having conversations was more helpful than only having conversations, but not to the same extent that they believed combining various skills' practice was useful for improving reading or writing. The majority of the students in class A, however, had the opposite general opinion, believing that conversation alone was more helpful for them to improve their speaking and listening than combining it with the practice of literate skills.

Overall, this study has found very strong support for an integrated approach to teaching English as a foreign language, which includes input, output, and interaction activities, and which requires using all four skills, based on the same materials. It would be useful to carry out further research into the effectiveness of the approach described in this paper using more objective methods of assessment.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

In this class, you have been reading various texts and then writing and having conversations about them. Please answer the questions that are that are written below about these activities and your English abilities as carefully as possible.

(Question 1 to question 6) Rank each statement by circling one answer.

1 (I agree strongly) 2 (I agree) 3 (Maybe) 4 (I do not agree)

1. Having conversations helped me to understand what I had read.

1 2 3 4

2. Writing helped me to understand what I had read.

1 2 3 4

3. Reading something before talking helped me to say more when I had conversations.

1 2 3 4

4. Writing something before talking helped me to say more when I had conversations.

1 2 3 4

5. Reading something before talking helped me to understand more of what my classmates said in the conversations.

1 2 3 4

6. Writing something before talking helped me to understand more of what my classmates said in the conversations.

1 2 3 4

7. Which helped you MOST to become a better reader? Circle only ONE answer.

Reading / Writing / Having conversations / Reading and writing /
Reading and having conversations / Writing and having conversations /
Reading and writing and having conversations

8. Which helped you MOST to become a better listener? Circle only ONE answer. Reading / Writing / Having conversations / Reading and writing /
Reading and having conversations / Writing and having conversations /
Reading and writing and having conversations

9. Which helped you MOST to become a better speaker? Circle only ONE answer. Reading / Writing / Having conversations / Reading and writing /
Reading and having conversations / Writing and having conversations /
Reading and writing and having conversations

10. Which helped you MOST to become a better writer? Circle only ONE answer. Reading / Writing / Having conversations / Reading and writing /
Reading and having conversations / Writing and having conversations /
Reading and writing and having conversations

Appendix B: The Students' English Proficiency Levels

The 20 students were placed in class A according to their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores, which varied from 403 to 497 and were achieved in an on-campus administration of the test at the end of the prior semester. The average of their TOEFL scores was 416. There were 25 students enrolled both in class B and in class C. These students had self-selected a program of study that required the credits of this course. They were placed in class B or class C basically in student identification number order. Their scores on the TOEIC IP (Institutional Program) Test, taken on-campus at the end of the twelfth week of the first semester, varied from 365 to 760. The average of these scores was 591.

In 2003, the Educational Testing Service, which produces the TOEFL and the TOEIC, published information enabling conversion between TOEFL and TOEIC scores.[4] Based on this, the lowest scores of the two groups, class A and classes B and C, are about the same, as TOEFL scores of between 390 and 410 (class A, 403) are considered equivalent to TOEIC scores of between 350 and 400 (classes B and C, 365). However, the highest scores are dissimilar. TOEFL scores of between 489 and 509 (class A, 497) are deemed equivalent to TOEIC scores of between 600 and 650, while TOEFL scores of between 549 and 569 are regarded as equivalent to TOEIC scores of 750 to 800 (classes B and C, 760). The same is true of the averages. TOEFL scores from 410 to 430 (class A, 416) are considered equivalent to TOEIC scores from 400 and 450. TOEFL scores from 470 and 489 are regarded as equivalent to TOEIC scores from 550 and 600 (classes B and C, 591).

[4] The following comparisons come from "Comparing TOEIC and TOEFL Scores." For a similar table, see "TOEIC-TOEFL Conversion Table".

Appendix C: Descriptions of the Class Activities

The students in class A always chose their own specific materials to read individually from a selection provided by the teacher. The basic structure of the class A lessons was for the students to first discuss something that they had read and written about individually beforehand in pairs, with one partner, and then each student would read something else chosen individually and answer questions based on it. The students in classes B and C all read the same materials assigned by the teacher for homework. Comprehension quizzes were taken on each reading assignment followed by pair discussions, with three different partners, about what was read in general and then by answering questions individually in writing based on the reading and then discussing them in small groups, of three or four students each. This was the procedure for about half of the lessons. The other lessons primarily involved pair and group discussions of various topics provided by the teacher or whole class listening practice.

In class A, the students were expected to read one graded reader,[5] borrowed from the university library, each week. They selected these books completely on their own. Then, they were to write a journal entry on the book and submit it through the Internet to the teacher.[6] The journal entry was to include the book's title and genre, a summary and the student's opinions of the story, any interesting words the student took notice of, and one question the student would like answered about the story. This assignment was to be completed by Monday.

The Monday lessons began with the students sitting in pairs and telling each other in English about the books they had read and written the journal entry about during the past week. They were encouraged to both summarize the book and give their opinions and feelings about it. The teacher wrote various words and expressions on the board to provide the students with a framework within which to speak about their books. This was similar to the format for the journal entries. Many of the students made use of these words, phrases, and sentences. After about twenty minutes, the teacher selected a few students to give a short oral report in English to the whole class about their partner's book.

Following the oral reports, each student chose a newspaper article[7] to read and answer the associated questions. The teacher had placed them on empty desks, and the students walked around the room to make their selections. After reading the article and answering the questions, each student walked to the teacher's desk to have the answers checked and any difficulties resolved. Then, they returned to their desks and wrote a journal entry about the article on their laptops, using the same format as for their book journal entries and also submitting it in the same way. Once this was completed, the students went to the library to exchange their books, and after returning to the classroom, began reading them.

On Thursdays, the students first sat in pairs and told their one partner in English about the newspaper articles they had read and written journal entries about on the

[5] These were Oxford Bookworms published by Oxford University Press and come in various levels of difficulty, from stage 1 to stage 6; the higher the stage, the more difficult. Most students chose stage 2 or 3.

[6] Students submitted these into a folder maintained by the file hosting service Dropbox, Dropbox, Inc., which can be accessed from dropbox.com, https://www.dropbox.com.

[7] For many years, The Guardian created these for English language learners, and the selection changed regularly. Now, there is only an archive, which is no longer added to, from which to choose. The articles are of two levels: advanced or low-intermediate. Most students chose low-intermediate level. They can be found at the guardian.com, http://www.theguardian.com/education/series/classroom-materials.

previous Monday. This took about twenty minutes. Then, the students walked around the room in order for each to choose a short essay or story[8] to read and answer a portion of the associated questions, those concerning comprehension and vocabulary. The teacher had placed a selection of these of different levels of difficulty on empty desks in the room. When finished, each student brought the short reading and answers to the teacher's desk. The teacher then marked the answers and explained any corrections that were needed. After this, the students silently read their books or wrote their journal entries about their books on their laptops.

At the beginning of the semester, many of the students clearly lacked confidence in writing and speaking in English. However, by the time the questionnaire was administered, all of the students were much more comfortable in performing both tasks. The journal entries were much longer and contained a much wider range of vocabulary and expressions than at the first. The pair work discussions about the books and newspaper articles also increased in length and were carried out in a much more confident manner. Whereas at first the discussions were about five minutes of hesitating talk, by the time the data for this study was collected, it was not usual for them to last twenty minutes or more and to be full of lively talking.

For classes B and C, the students were expected to read a certain number of chapters in one of the class textbooks, graded readers,[9] for homework for about half of the classes, generally every other week. They were told to always read each assignment at least twice before the due date. Precisely, this was for eight classes in the first semester and, for four classes in the second semester before the questionnaire was administered.

The first thing the students did in class, when this homework was due, was to take short quiz of eight multiple-choice comprehension questions about details of what they were supposed to have read. They sat in typical rows to take the quiz. This took between five and ten minutes, and was followed by the quizzes being switched among students, the answers being gone over, and the quizzes graded and handed in, which took another five minutes or so. Then, the students walked to the back of the classroom and stood in two rows facing one another and spoke in pairs, mostly in English, about the homework reading and the quiz. After about ten minutes, the students were rotated to obtain new partners. Students spoke with three partners in this manner. For the most part, the teacher only observed and monitored the activity while walking up and down the row, though occasionally students asked the teacher questions or the teacher supplied a word or an explanation unsolicited.

Next, the students returned to their seats, which were now arranged in groups of three or four. Each student was given a written copy of the same two questions, which were somehow related to the story. For about ten minutes, students individually wrote a response to each of the questions in their notebooks. Then, they closed their notebooks and discussed the two questions, mostly in English, in their groups. After about fifteen minutes, they were given a third question to individually write an answer to for five minutes and then to discuss for five minutes. Following this, a fourth question was given to write about and then discuss in the same way. If students wanted, they could ask the

8 These were SRA cards produced by The Science Research Associates Inc., which is now part of SRA/McGraw-Hill. They come in various levels of difficulty coded by colors and were originally for use in the teaching of reading in American elementary schools. Students generally chose purple and violet, which are lower intermediate level.

9 These were all Oxford Bookworms, which are leveled from stage 1 to stage 6, with stage 1 being the easiest to read, published by Oxford University Press. In the first semester, the first book was of short stories, stage 3, and the second was a novel, also stage 3. In the second semester, the first book was also of short stories, but stage 4, and the second was again to have been a novel, stage 3; but, the questionnaire was administered before the students began work with this fourth book.

teacher questions, which did not happen very often. Otherwise, the teacher walked among the groups, mostly just monitoring the speaking and observing, and occasionally adding information or ideas or suggesting words the students were searching for.

The homework for three other classes each semester was to listen to the both of the two two- to four-minute recordings for one lesson of an ESL radio drama[10] and answer the printed questions about them. In the class this was due, the students first compared answers to the homework with a few classmates and then asked the teacher any questions they had. This took about ten to fifteen minutes. After this, the teacher led the class in doing the next lesson of the radio drama, followed by a short dictation using a very short passage of the recording. All three of these classes were also carried out in the second semester before the questionnaire was administered.

In two classes in the first semester and in two classes in the second semester before filling out the questionnaire, the students were given topics to speak about in pairs and in small groups. In two other classes in the first semester, the students participated in a variety of language learning activities.

In the beginning of the school year, quite a few of the students had difficulties writing and especially speaking in English. As time went by, most students became able to do both of these tasks to a much greater extent and much more comfortably. These things were easily observable. It is somewhat impossible to comment on whether or not the students' reading abilities improved based on classroom performance as all the texts and quizzes were different. The same is true of their listening, which was either mostly listening to their classmates, which never seemed to be difficult for them, or mostly listening to the recordings, which always seemed to be rather difficult for them.

[10] This was an intermediate-level listening text published by Longman and is now out of print.