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***DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
ABILITIES AND SKILLS IN
TEACHING FOREIGN
LANGUAGES***

*Бұл мақалада шет тілін үйренуге
арналған негізгі мәселелер
қарастырылған.*

*В данной статье рассматриваются
основные навыки при обучении
иностранного языка.*

The terms *skill* and *ability* are interchangeably. It will be useful at this point to make a distinction. Let us say that those skills which are defined with reference to medium (speaking, hearing, composing and comprehending) are *linguistic skills*. They refer to the way in which the language system is manifested, or recognized to be manifested, as usage. And we will refer to those skills which are defined with reference to the manner and mode in which the system is realized as use as *communicative abilities*. Communicative abilities embrace linguistic skills but not the reverse [1].

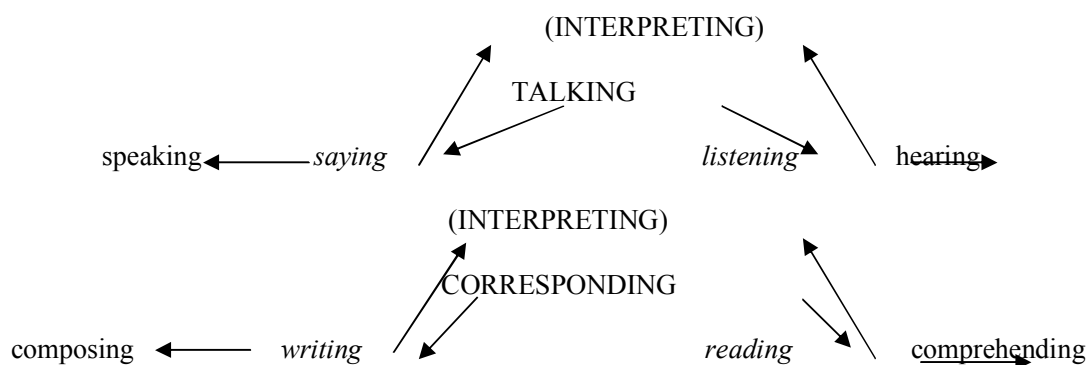
The rather elaborate representation of these skills and abilities that has been developed in this article is in sharp contrast to the simple scheme which served as the starting point of our discussion. There is little point in complicating matters in this way unless it can be shown that this complication has some bearing on the learning and teaching of languages.

The aims of language teaching are very commonly defined in terms of four skills: speaking, understanding speech (or listening), reading and writing. Speaking and listening are said to relate to language expressed through the aural medium and reading and writing are said to relate to language expressed through the visual medium. Another way of representing these skills is by reference not to the medium but to the activity of the language user. Thus speaking and writing are said to be active, or productive skills whereas listening and reading are said to be passive or receptive skills. In the following diagram we can give a general idea of these different language skills. Those which are defined with reference to manner are in capital letters and those which are defined with reference to mode are in italics.

In this diagram, the sameness of typeface is meant to indicate the sameness of type of the different skills. Thus, interpreting, talking and corresponding are skills defined with reference to manner; saying, listening, writing and reading are skills defined with reference to mode; and speaking, hearing, composing and comprehending are skills which are defined with reference to medium. Medium skills have to do with how the language system is manifested as usage and manner and mode skills have to do with how the system is realized as use. The arrows on the diagram are intended to show dependency. Thus, you can speak a sentence without saying anything and you can compose a sentence without writing anything. Similarly, you can hear what a sentence means in terms of its signification without listening to what value it has as an act of communication and you can comprehend the signification of a written sentence without recognizing what it counts as in the context of a particular piece of written discourse. Saying



something, however, necessarily involves speaking a sentence, and writing something necessarily involves composing a sentence. Similarly, you can say something without talking, as when you deliver a speech or a sermon, but you cannot talk without saying and listening. And you can write something without corresponding, as when you write a report (or as I am now writing this article) but you cannot correspond without writing and reading. Interpreting is represented here as the highest level skill: it is the ability to process language as communication and it underlies all language use. You cannot talk or correspond without interpreting but you can interpret without talking or corresponding, as when you attend a lecture (where interpreting underlies listening) or read a newspaper (where interpreting underlies reading) or produce an essay (where interpreting underlies writing) or deliver an after-dinner address (where interpreting underlies saying).



We can say that speaking in the usage sense involves the manifestation either of the phonological system or of the grammatical system of the language or both. The term used for variation in phonological manifestation is *accent* and that used for variation in grammatical manifestation is *dialect*. In both cases, speaking (with a certain accent or with a certain dialect) is simply the physical embodiment of abstract systems [2].

When we speak normally in the course of a natural communicative interaction we do not only use our vocal organs. The act of speaking involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gesture, the movements of the muscles of the face, and indeed of the whole body [3]. All of these non-vocal accompaniments of speaking as a communicative activity are transmitted through the visual medium. When we think of speaking in this way, therefore, it is no longer true that it is associated solely with the aural medium.

If one thinks of speaking as a way in which the language system is manifested through the use of the organs of speech, then it is true that speaking is productive rather than receptive and operates through the aural rather than the visual medium. But if one thinks of speaking as exemplifying use rather than usage, as being a communicative activity, then it is both productive and receptive, both aural and visual. It will be useful at this point to mark this distinction with different terms.

Let us reserve the term *speaking* for the manifestation of language as usage and refer to the realization of language as use in spoken interaction as *talking*. We can then say that talking involves the use of both aural and visual media since it is an activity which makes use of gesture, facial expression and other paralinguistic phenomena. We can also say that it has a productive part when one participant in an interaction assumes the active role of speaker and we will refer to this productive aspect of talking as *saying*. But now what about the receptive aspect of talking? At this point we must consider the skill which is conventionally referred to as 'listening'.

When we say that we understand a piece of spoken language we can mean one of two things: either that we understand it as usage or that we understand it as use. On the one hand we recognize that the signals received by the ear relate to the phonological and grammatical system of the language concerned, that they constitute sentences, and we understand what the sentences mean as, for example, sentences in English. In one sense, then, understanding means the recognition of the signification of sentences. Let us call this kind of understanding *hearing*. To understand language as use, on the other hand, we have to recognize the communicative function of the sentences we hear, we have to recognize what acts of communication they realize. What this involves is the recognition of how the use of a particular sentence relates to what else has been said in the interaction: in other words, it is the receptive aspect of talking. We will reserve the term



listening to refer to this activity. Hearing, then, in the sense defined here, is the activity of recognizing that signals conveyed through the aural medium constitute sentences which have a certain signification. Listening is the activity of recognizing what function sentences have in an interaction, what communicative value they take on as instances of use. Listening, therefore, in this sense, is the receptive counterpart of saying and depends on the visual as well as the aural medium.

Let us now turn our attention to reading and writing. The first observation we might make is that whereas it is reasonable to think of saying and listening as reciprocal aspects of the one basic activity of talking, reading and writing cannot so readily be considered as reciprocal activities in quite the same sense. In most written discourse, however, this inter-relationship does not exist: reading and writing are not typically reciprocal activities in the same way as are saying and listening. It is true that we do have written as well as spoken interactions, as in the case of an exchange of correspondence and indeed correspondence might be considered as the larger-scale version of talking in the written mode. But there is a vast amount of written discourse that does not take the form of an exchange. Usually, what is written does not directly depend on a previous reading activity and a particular act of writing is not necessarily prompted by a particular act of reading.

Writing as a physical activity is productive in the same way as speaking is (using the term speaking in the sense previously defined). That is to say, the movement of certain bodily organs produces something perceptible to the senses. In the case of speaking, the movements of the speech organs produce sounds which are perceived by the ear and in the case of writing; the movements of the arm and fingers (mechanically aided for me at the moment as I write this by the keys of my typewriter) produce marks which are perceived by the eye. These marks are letters which are arranged into groups to form words in accordance with the graphological system of English. I do not simply tap out letters at random. Nor do the groups of letters constituting words occur randomly: they combine to make well-formed sentences of English. So one way of describing writing is to say that it is the use of the visual medium to manifest the graphological and grammatical system of the language /2/. That is to say, writing in one sense is the production of sentences as instances of usage. But of course I am not just producing sentences at the moment as I sit here in front of my typewriter. I could, for example, write:

Yesterday we were asked a lot of questions.

Where are the children playing?

I am puzzled by Einstein's theory of relativity.

Here I have written three sentences and each one of them makes perfect sense in itself, each one of them has its own signification as a sentence. But if I had simply incorporated them into the paragraph without comment I am puzzled by Einstein's theory of relativity they would have made no sense at all where are the children playing? It would have been assumed that they had appeared by mistake as the result of a printing error.

What I am doing as I write, then, is not just producing a sequence of English sentences. I am using sentences to create a discourse and each sentence takes on a particular value as a part of this discourse. In one sense, then, we may say that writing is the act of making up correct sentences and transmitting them through the visual medium as marks on paper. Let us call this simply *composing* and say that it corresponds with speaking in the aural medium. At the same time, writing as an activity that I am indulging in at the moment is not simply composing. What I am doing (successfully or not) is developing a discussion and arranging different points in such a way as to persuade you, the reader, that I have something worthwhile to say. What is involved in this activity? There is certainly more to it than simply putting sentences together in a sequence like wagons in a train. A good deal of time is spent going over what has previously been written and pondering on how the discourse might most effectively develop from it. Thus, what I am writing now is dependent on my recollection of what has gone before. It is also dependent on how I think what I have written so far will be understood and on what I assume to be common ground between myself, the writer, and you, the reader. In other words, writing as use, as distinct from composing (writing as usage), can be said to be receptive in the sense that it proceeds by reference to the Writer's own interpretation of what has preceded and to his assessment as to how what has been written and is being written will be received by the reader. If we regard reading as being receptive, therefore, then writing as use must be partially receptive too.

The most important recourse that any potential reader possesses, whether reading in a first or any other language, is an awareness of the way in which we use language. For reading is above all to do with language. There are two things which we all know about language: first that we use it for a purpose; second that it only



makes sense in context, that is as part of a larger text or in a situation.

When reading on his or her own, there is a sense in which the reader remains a member of, for example, the community of sports page readers, readers of romantic fiction, or readers of feminist poetry. The kind of reading options we take up say something about our membership of communities as well as individual preference [4].

We can make the same point about reading as was made earlier about listening. The understanding can refer to the signification of sentences or to the value they assume in communicative use. That is to say, reading can refer to the ability to recognize sentences and their meaning as linguistic elements or it can refer to the ability to recognize how they function as parts of a discourse. 'the former ability is clearly the receptive analogue of composing and the visual analogue of hearing. Let us use the term *comprehending* to refer to this ability. Comprehending in this sense is the ability to recognize sentences manifested through the visual medium and to associate them with their correct signification. It corresponds with hearing in the aural medium.

Reading as the understanding of discourse does not simply involve the recognition of what words and sentences mean but also the recognition of the value they take on in association with each other as elements in a discourse. What happens when we read with understanding is that we actively work out what the discourse means as we go along, predicting what is to come by reference to what has preceded. Reading in this sense is a kind of accomplishment whereby a discourse is created in the mind by means of a process of reasoning. In this respect, the ability to read and the ability to write are the same and it is neutral with regard to production or reception. Essentially this ability enables us to create or recreate discourse from the resources available in the language system and, on occasions, from other conventional symbols. We will call this ability, common to both writing and reading as communicative activities, *interpreting*. Interpreting, then, is the ability in the visual medium which corresponds to talking in the aural/ visual medium, with the difference that in talking the productive/ receptive aspects are made overt in saying and listening.

I think it is to the pedagogic implications of this discussion that we now turn our attention. To begin with, it will be generally acknowledged that the ultimate aim in language learning is to acquire communicative competence, to interpret, whether this is made overt in talking or corresponding or whether it remains covert as a psychological activity underlying the ability to say, listen, write and read. I assume that the issue is not whether this is the aim of language learning but how this aim is to be achieved. What evidence we have, however, suggests that this is not the case: the acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language. On the contrary, it would seem to be the case that an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities.

The suggestion is, then, that we can make use of the learners' knowledge of non-verbal aspects of discourse, and of their ability to interpret them, as a means of linking their communicative abilities in their own language to a realization of these abilities in the language they are learning. To put it another way, we need to remove these abilities from a dependence on linguistic skills in the mother tongue and associate them with linguistic skills in the foreign language. We thereby represent (without misrepresenting) foreign language learning not as the acquisition of abilities which are new but as the transference of the abilities that have already been acquired into a different means of expression. If this is done successfully, of course, the learner can go on to extend the range of his communicative abilities through the foreign language without reference to his mother tongue. I think it is important to recognize that language teaching is a theoretical as well as a practical activity that effective teaching materials and classroom procedures depend on principles deriving from an understanding of what language is and how it is used. Thus a teacher must develop students' skills in four aspects: speaking, writing, listening and reading when teaching Foreign Language.

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