

## An Integrated Approach for Teaching True Beginners: One Program's Experience

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### Abstract

*As Intensive English Programs (IEPs) grow and placement trends change, it is imperative for programs to adapt continuously to meet student and program needs. Learner variability, especially in the beginning levels, can deeply influence the structural needs of a program. IEP instructors can develop learning environments that foster the success of even the lowest proficiency student by incorporating the Integrated Skills Approach into the beginning level classroom. This case study reviews one program's journey through the process of creating and implementing an integrated skills class designed to help true beginner students. The class's creators endeavored to build a stronger English language foundation that would better support students throughout their language studies. They also hoped to alleviate the level polarization and low academic achievement for lower proficiency students that had occasionally occurred in the program. The instructors share and reflect upon the positive outcomes and pitfalls of their processes after the piloted session of the class.*

## Aitken & Browning - An Integrated Approach for Teaching True Beginners

Higher educational institutions across the United States have experienced high growth in international student enrollment in recent years. One of the largest increases in international student population occurred in the Academic Year (AY) 2014, when the overall enrollment of international students in the United States increased by 8% (Institute of International Education, 2014). This 8% includes students with a plethora of different nationalities, first languages, and levels of English language proficiency. Students that do not meet the institutional admission requirements on English proficiency exams such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are often placed into an intensive language learning program.

With the influx of English language learners, Intensive English Programs (IEPs) have found it necessary to continually reevaluate the program's curricular structure and adapt to meet the needs of the ever-growing student population. This increased student population also requires a regular monitoring of changes in placement trends so that administrators and instructors can continue to meet students' needs by providing high quality language instruction. It is not uncommon to discover that a program must adapt existing courses or add new courses to meet students at their skill or proficiency levels.

The Southeast Missouri State University IEP is an ESL academic program that provides college preparation in English language listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. The IEP operates in five eight-week sessions with eight levels of reading, writing, and grammar – levels 1 and 2 are considered Beginning, 3 and 4 are Low Intermediate, 5 and 6 are High Intermediate, and 7 and 8 are Advanced. Additionally, there are five levels of listening and speaking – Low Beginning, High Beginning, Low Intermediate, High Intermediate, and Advanced. Listening and speaking are taught as combined block classes; the other three content areas are taught as segregated skill classes.

Our IEP has been no exception to the aforementioned trends. Its enrollment met record highs in AY 2014 as well, reaching over 200 students. This was a substantial increase from the previous average of about 120 students. The enrollment changes occurred so quickly that the program had to act fast to accommodate the vast increase with more classrooms and instructors. With the exception of increasing

the number of sections for the different levels of content area classes, no new classes were added at that time.

As the overall IEP student population grew, so did enrollment of true beginners. True beginners are defined here as students who have had minimal exposure to even the most basic elements of English as a second language. Their numbers increased from zero to nine in AY 2014. The numbers then fell in AY 2015 to four, where they remained through the Fall 2015 semester. This huge jump resulted in extreme polarization in the beginning-level classes. This caused instruction/planning issues for teachers as well as comprehension and motivation issues for all beginning students. True beginners repeated classes more often as they were unable to keep up with the curricular demands. For the remainder of their IEP studies, these students continued to struggle due to an inadequate foundation in English. After seeing the struggles faced by both instructors and students, the integrated skills concept was first suggested, then researched, and finally chosen as the ‘something different’ that might alleviate the aforesaid struggles.

The Integrated Skills Approach is based on the concept that in “natural, day-to-day experience, oral and written languages are not kept separate and isolated from one another. Instead, they often occur together, integrated in specific communication events” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001, 117). Su (2007) maintains that the four skills combined (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) “support growth and development in literacy.” By using this approach, instructors can teach the students in a way that encourages the development of all four language skills simultaneously. This in turn prepares the students to have sufficient proficiency to perform better in higher, segregated skills courses.

### **The Class**

The first step in the development of this class was making a decision: What classes were going to be integrated? We decided that reading, writing, and grammar would be integrated and taught as an alternative to the traditional segregated level one classes. This was taught separately from the afternoon Listening and Speaking class. A low section of Beginning Listening and Speaking was established to meet the lower-level listening and speaking needs of the true beginners. The next step was to determine

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the focus of the class and develop the curriculum. Oxford (2001) states, “For beginners, the content often involves basic social and interpersonal communication skills, but past the beginning level, the content can become increasingly academic and complex.” For this reason, we decided to combine survival English with the more academic elements of our traditional level one classes. We hoped that this would create the solid foundation needed by our students in order to be more successful in subsequent IEP classes.

We also hoped to ensure that an integrated skill course would be an adequate alternative to the traditional level one classes. To determine our new curriculum, we compared our already-existing level one Reading, Writing, and Grammar curricula to the scope and sequence of five low-beginning textbooks. The most basic concepts from the textbooks were identified and included on the curriculum. Furthermore, the traditional level one curricula for reading, writing, and grammar were evaluated in order to identify the most basic concepts which were subsequently broken down into smaller, more digestible pieces of information. We determined the focus of the class would be on vocabulary development, reading comprehension, writing skills, and, in a slightly smaller capacity, listening and speaking development. Next, we created a diagnostic test based on the new curriculum.

Upon arrival for each eight week session, new students are required to take the ESL COMPASS<sup>©</sup> Placement Exam. This placement test includes grammar, reading, and listening skills in a digital format. Additionally, writing placement occurs by means of a separate writing placement exam that is graded holistically. Students are then placed into their classes based on a placement matrix that was developed within our program using a combination of norm and criterion-referenced alignments. The criterion to enter the true beginner course was to receive a placement score in the lower end of the level one scoring criteria in all content areas. For the first eight week session in the Fall semester of 2015, three out of 43 students tested in as “true beginners.” These three students would experience the pilot run of the Integrated Skills course. On day two of the first week of classes, diagnostics were given in all of the classes as a means of norming placement. The diagnostic for the Integrated Skills course block consisted of a comprehensive exam that was generated based on the midterm and final exam that were provided by

the publisher of the books we used. The exam covered all of the skills and vocabulary that students would learn in the level. In addition, there was a section to verify knowledge of the English alphabet.

Once the course began, all four skills were consciously and consistently included into the daily plan, and activities concurrently involved more than one skill. Initially, the book, along with its supplements, was followed almost exactly. We chose to use *Ventures Basic* (Bitterlin, Johnson, Price & Ramirez, 2014) which included a student's book with an audio CD, a workbook with an audio CD, a literacy workbook, and a teacher's edition with an assessment audio CD and CD-ROM. The units were themed with topics such as personal information, school, and friends and family in order to facilitate the learning of frequently-used vocabulary. Each unit consisted of vocabulary practice, a grammar focus, a reading passage, and a writing activity. Cambridge Publishing also provided additional practice with each lesson through downloadable materials, flashcards, and games via the *Ventures* website as well as an installable instructional presentation tool. Each lesson was taught from the book, and we often supplemented the vocabulary instruction with games like 'Go Fish' or 'Concentration.'

The first language of all three students was Arabic, which made certain aspects of instruction much easier. However, the first language was excluded as much as possible for vocabulary study. Instead, the meaning of vocabulary words was taught through pictures. The students' first language was used, instead, for meta-language and more challenging concepts. For example, the term "verb" was translated and copied and used to help the students understand the simple English sentence. Each concept was taught using scaffolding, demonstration, and guided production. As the students advanced through the course, so did their instructional demands. After the fourth week of the term, the students, especially the two who were taking both Integrated Skills and Listening and Speaking, began to progress more rapidly than before. The book alone was no longer meeting the needs of the students. In the second half of the term, the amount of supplemental materials and activities increased substantially, including assignments such as short presentations and topic-based sentence writing.

Another important step we took in creating this supportive classroom environment was to take time each day for free-talking. With such a large amount of scaffolding and guidance at this level, it was imperative to step back and allow students time for natural production in the target language. This also acted as a guide for us to know how much the students' proficiency had actually progressed.

At the end of the eight-week session, the students were given the diagnostic exam again as a comprehensive final exam. Additionally, the students were required to take the initial ESL COMPASS© Placement Exam a second time to allow us to monitor their progress in a quantifiable way. The results placed one student into traditional level one courses; the other two students placed into traditional level one writing and level two reading, grammar, and listening and speaking.

### **Conclusion**

We determined that the class was a success. We saw marked improvement in day-to-day interactions with the students as well as improvements in placement test scores. Reflecting on the class, we note some considerations for other institutions or programs that are considering an integrated beginner class, in some form or another.

Once actual instruction began, it was determined that our student breakdown was more likely one true beginner and two false beginners, rather than all true beginners. However, we believed that neither of the false beginners would have met the academic expectations of our traditional level one classes – part of our original problem. This conclusion mirrors Oxford's (2001) assertion that “[e]ven if it were possible to fully develop one or two skills in the absence of all the others, such an approach would not ensure adequate preparation for later success in academic communication...” Also, as students were not required to take both the Integrated Skills class and Listening and Speaking, a substantial difference formed in the development and progress of the students. Unfortunately, the true beginner was the student not taking Listening and Speaking due to personal reasons, and the comparatively higher advancement of the two other students was significant. This caused the very same polarization issues within the class that we had originally set out to resolve.

Initially, it was decided at the administrative level that the integrated class would be taught as an alternative section of the traditional level one content areas courses. We made the decision to pilot the class before giving it a permanent place in the program. However, it is simple enough to create a new course with our registrar, but it is very difficult to delete it once it has been entered into the system. This ultimately caused some unforeseen administrative difficulties when the time came to register students for the second eight week session because the students tested into a traditional level one course for some of the content areas after retaking the placement exam. Taking the same course in subsequent terms when the initial attempt earned a passing grade was problematic, particularly because some of the students had goals of obtaining scholarships from their country in the future and double courses on their transcripts could potentially disqualify them. In order to fix the problem, a special letter was sent to the scholarship program with an explanation of the doubled courses.

Even with these considerations kept in mind, developing and piloting this Integrated Skills class has definitely made evident the potential gaps of even mildly segregated-skills classrooms for true beginners. Taking time to fill those holes before they cause problems can build a firmer, more solid foundation with which those students can move forward. Language learning is different for every student; being versatile and fluid with curricula is an effective way to endeavor to meet students' needs.

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