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LANGUAGE PRACTICE DRILLS: THEIR USEFULNESS AND SHORTCOMINGS

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Drills aim to give the learner the maximum opportunity to produce correct examples of a particular structure. New material is to be given in small amounts because, according to behaviourist theory, the learner should not be discouraged by producing wrong answers but, on the contrary, must be given immediate positive reinforcement for his correct responses. Thus the key pattern is that of stimulus/response/reinforcement. Drills, of course, typically practise a pattern and have been thought to be ideally suited to the language laboratory situation. Basically, once enough reinforced repetitions of enough structures have been practised, the student is supposed to be able to display a high degree of fluency. However, the behaviourist theory has not really measured up to the full expectations of language teachers.

A fundamental criticism of the usual substitution, mutation and transformation drills is that *meaning* is neglected. It is quite possible to produce a string of sounds (with a rather "tum-tum-tum" effect) without any real thought as to what one is saying. Indeed, a mechanical response to a question can be made by a student without his understanding the prompt or even his realizing that the prompt is, in fact, a question.

A further shortcoming closely connected with lack of meaning is the failure of most drills to prepare the student to use the language in actual communication. Rivers and Temperley (1978) demonstrate the unreality and lack of application to the students' situation of many drills. In many cases, the learner practises, in unnatural situations, a form of "structure-speech" (Dakin, 1973) which he does not necessarily transfer to real life. The response to a statement such as "They arrived at noon" does not have to be limited (as it may be in a drill) to "No, they didn't!" In a situation of natural communication, the form and content of the response is dependent on a number of external factors, quite possibly unknowable to the questioner.

Another potential weakness in the more orthodox drill is the possibility of over-generalisation (eg., from "I have already seen it" to "I have already liked it"). A perceptive learner will want to experiment but drills which seek to prevent mistakes do not give negative instances of when a rule does not apply. Yet, from a cognitivist viewpoint, of course, the mistake of over-generalisation may show a growing sensitivity to the basic rules of a language.

The repetitious nature of drills can also lead to a rapid decline in the learner's interest and attention. This is especially true of the younger learner. However, the age and stage of the student will make a difference. Adult learners, in particular, once they perceive the purpose of a drill, are inclined to push beyond the normal boredom threshold — motivation is strong. Furthermore, adult students at a more elementary level could find drills more interesting than those who are more advanced.

What then are some of the strengths of the drilling technique? Mechanical routines can in themselves be confidence-building, especially for the elementary student. In addition, the student possibly gains some pronunciation practice using pieces of connected speech. He could well be unconsciously learning the natural rhythms of intonation and stress (although exactly how "natural" is, in fact, debatable). There could also be some justification for the viewpoint that the learning of meaning could be purposely delayed until the formal apparatus of language has been acquired. Yet, I feel that the natural curiosity of most students would preclude this possibility.

Even if the usual behaviourist drills have severe weaknesses and relatively few strengths, the worst faults — lack of meaning and naturalness — can be at least partially rectified. Byrne (1976) and Dakin (1973) both suggest ways of making drills more meaningful.

Byrne, for example, suggests the use of visual aids (pictures, magnet boards, etc.), the gradual phasing out of cues, open-ended responses (where answers are not predetermined but should be correct and appropriate), and imaginary situations. For example, the teacher may set an imaginary scene — "I've just bought a house which I'm furnishing" — to practise the perfect tense by eliciting such responses as "Have you bought (a table) yet?" If a student is to practise concepts such as agreement/disagreement, the drill should be combined with appropriate visual

aids or imaginary situations to make them more meaningful. To incorrect statements made about a picture by the teacher, the response could be, "No, he isn't! He's (swimming)."

Dakin classifies meaningful drills under the headings of application (following Lyons, 1968), collocation, and implication relationships. Application relationships can be prompted by pictures, sound effects or knowledge of the world. (Stimulus: "Fandi Ahmad". Response: "Fandi Ahmad plays soccer".) Collocation drills can practise, among other relationships, the location of places. ("You want to find a taxi"/"Can you tell me where the nearest taxi stand is?") An example of an implication drill may be in demonstrating an antonymous relationship. ("Are you standing up?"/"No, I'm sitting down.") A synonymous connection can also be practised. ("The coffee tin is almost empty."/"There's not much coffee left.")

Unfortunately, even so-called meaningful drills do not really practise intended meaning. For example, is the sentence "I see the newspaper's on the patio" a simple statement of fact or an implied criticism of the delivery boy who was meant to leave it elsewhere? If attitudes, as well as intentions, are fixed by the teacher, the utterances of the student must remain artificial. "He is not saying what he means, but only what we want him to mean." (Dakin, 1973, p. 88).

To conclude, I feel drills can play a useful role in language learning if they can be kept as meaningful as possible within the limitations of the classroom and the language laboratory. (Incidentally, one wonders how far these more and more meaningful drills can still be called drills rather than problem-solving exercises!) Naturally enough, too, the physical environment of the classroom, the personality of the teacher, his rapport with the class, and the type of learner in the class must have a substantial, probably decisive, influence on whether drills will appear to rise above their limitations and succeed or fail — despite any theoretical comments one may make.

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