

Oral Drilling Reviewed

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Introduction

Since the first English language teaching materials were produced around the end of the sixteenth century, the teaching of English has developed in conjunction with global social and political changes, along with developments in technology and language learning theory as well as academic fashion. The introduction of new technology in the form of personal computers and cheap storage media has accelerated the changes in recent years, and allowed a greater scope for the student to gain autonomy in the language learning process. The interactive nature of these new electronic media has conferred great benefits and had a liberating effect on the individual student. However, even though the technology is becoming more widespread, the focus of the discussion of teaching should not be shifted so much onto the uses of CD-Rom storage material, the internet or email; the role of the teacher is changing but that his or her role is still played out best within the classroom.

At a recent meeting of the Japanese Association of Language Teachers there were more presentations on computer assisted language learning than on materials development, and almost the same number as for methodology. Many colleges in Japan require students to own personal computers, yet a survey of students at Asahikawa Medical College has shown that only about 22% of students possess personal computers, with less than half that number having access to email. Indeed, on a global scale, the relative ease with which teachers and students in Japan can avail themselves of such technology puts them very much in a minority. Language learning is still firmly rooted in the classroom.

One of the areas of language teaching in which interest seems to have declined, at

least in Japan, is that of oral drilling. Possibly, this is because teachers are no longer doing it, or merely reluctant to discuss it, deeming it uncommunicative and therefore 'old-fashioned' and unnecessary, or because teachers continue to use the basic techniques of drilling and feel there is nothing more to discuss. Within a modern syllabus an eclectic approach is often advocated and therefore a strong case must be made for oral drills and their continuing development.

Here, I intend to give a brief overview of the background to oral drills in the ELT classroom, list the different types of drills available and then discuss the types most relevant to teaching classes of medical students.

Historical Overview

Oral drilling is the repetition of a language items, either individually or in a group, in response to a cue from the teacher or some electronic medium. Its systematic use was advocated first as a scientific approach to language learning in the 1920's and 30's by the influential British language teacher Palmer, although it had been a characteristic of some classes under the Direct Method of teaching at the end of the nineteenth century. However, the technique was made central to what became the Audio-Lingual Method, adopted by the American military authorities after the Second World War as a means of training large numbers of speakers of foreign languages

The Audio-Lingual method was developed from the work in the fields of linguistics, behavioural psychology and cultural anthropology. At that time in America, prevailing opinion in cultural anthropology maintained that language was learned in a cultural context in the same way as any other social activity. The American structural linguists, such as Bloomfield, emphasised the structure of a language rather than its meaning: in the application of scientific methodology to language, meaning could not be analysed whereas form could be. In psychology, Watson and later Skinner and other Behaviorists, maintained that language, like any other form of behaviour, is learned through the process of operant conditioning: behaviour modification through repeated stimulation of a subject and with positive reinforcement, a reward, for a correct response. Language was thought to be a 'set of habits' which a child learns through imitation: successful or appropriate imitation is rewarded through, initially, parental praise, and later by success in achieving aims, and thereby reinforced. Audio-Lingual methodology advocated a similar process for learning a second language: stimulus or prompt, response, and reinforcement.

The three theoretical fields gave rise to the classroom drilling techniques of the

Audio-Lingual method. The drills emphasised high frequency language patterns, the structure of the language and its sounds and the memorisation and cue, response, repetition and reinforcement of behaviourist learning theory.

In the decades since the heyday of language drilling, its use has been attacked on many fronts. Chomsky undermined the theoretical basis of extensive drilling in audio-lingualism by arguing that a response to a stimulus is not always predictable, that language learning is not a behaviourist pattern of stimulus-response but necessitates a set of internalised rules. Further criticism of drilling came in the late 1970's from Krashen when he made the distinction between language learning and acquisition: that the latter is more important for developing communicative ability and that there is little point in learning something by rote if it does not contribute to communication.

In some teaching contexts, audio-lingual methods are still followed although the European traditions of Structural-Situational methodology and later Functional/Notionalism, both with a focus more on meaning, have also been influential on current trends. In the 70's the Communicative Approach developed, which, in its more extreme or 'hard' form maintained that the traditional presentation and then practice of language items is not necessary, that meaningful input is sufficient as form follows meaning. Proponents' criticisms of drilling centred on its preoccupation with how something is said rather than what is said. However, within communicative teaching, a variety of communicative drills can be practised. Around the same time, the Humanistic Approach to teaching was developing, in which the teacher took on the role more of facilitator of learning rather than one who imparts knowledge to the students. A teacher-dominant activity like drilling may seem contradictory to this kind of approach but advocates of it, such as Moskowitz in the USA and Rinvulcri in Britain, have developed humanistic drills.

One criticism of drilling is that it only enables students to 'parrot' words, phrases or even parts of discourse: to repeat utterances at a given cue without truly understanding the language being used. Equally, language becomes mechanical when simple structural cue response drilling limits a learners production of the language. Drilling is often regarded as symptomatic of an over-concern with accuracy in production and that memorised language is not necessarily transferred to situations outside the classroom. Drills may have no regard for context and sometimes are not even logical and, especially for higher level students, over use of drills is boring and demotivating.

The structuralist or extensive audio-lingual drilling can be boring although many students feel comfortable doing it, deriving a sense of being able to say something and

initial self-confidence and feeling of achievement. These feelings may soon wear off as there is relatively poor application of drilled items outside the classroom without use of other teaching methods: memorising and mimicry do not equal learning. Drills were described as being too structure orientated and ignored the importance of 'doing' conversation or interacting communicatively. Drilling may be useful for acquiring phrases but learners need the ability to internalise this language and learn to apply it for themselves.

In more recent years drills were thought to be harmless but not useful as only the most simple rules of language use can be taught or learnt. Developing the learners communicative ability is seen by many as the main aim of the language class, and an over-reliance on artificial drills impedes this. Drills were seen as limiting student autonomy in encouraging response without thinking of meaning, only form and accuracy. Many teachers may be wary of using drills because they feel that they are constraining and controlling the students.

Most of these criticisms levelled oral drilling are fair in so far as they apply to a techniques used without sufficient planning, or to a method used to the exclusion of others. Well-constructed and appropriately used drills are still, and will continue to be, useful tools of the language teacher and useful and enjoyable activities for the students.

Types of Drill

The most elementary type of drill is the repetition drill in the form of stimulus, response and reward.

Teacher: "This is a pen."

Students: "This is a pen."

Teacher: "Good."

Particularly at beginner and lower levels, students need to hear and say the target language, sometimes a number of times. In group or chorus drills, repetition drill is 'safe' in that any errors the students make may seem to hidden by the other students as they practice the sounds, rhythm and intonation of the new item. The drill is concerned with only one specific structural pattern, and variety of vocabulary is kept to a minimum. It can be used at any time during a lesson to correct form or prosodic elements although it is described as 'meaningless' in that the response to the cue is always the same.

Variations on the meaningless structural drill demonstrate the association of forms and systematic patterning in the language and provide a chance to manipulate the grammar while increasing the students' facility with prosodic features. They involve substitu-

tion, mutation or transformation in the target structure:

Cue: "I've never seen that.",

Substitution response + heard: "I've never heard that."

Mutation response + he: "He's never seen that."

Transformation response + reported speech: "He said he'd never seen that."

These kind of drills may promote over-generalisation of language in that only positive examples of a rule is given. Practice is at a sentence level without regard for discourse, and the utterances are mechanical and unnatural to such a degree that some teachers feel they may be better done in the language laboratory.

Structural drills are 'meaningful' if the relationship between the cue and the response has some meaning, or if the student has to be able to understand the cue, both structurally and semantically, in order to respond. They force the student to think about the language being used and better prepare students to transfer the language rules to situations beyond the practice exercises. There are a number of different types that depend upon the relationships between cue and response. For example, application relationships can use visual cues or the students' general knowledge: a bottle of champagne beside the picture of a criminal could elicit, and drill, "He used to drink champagne." Collocation relationships depend on the rules governing lexical combinations, for example, a noun with a verb:

Teacher: This is a great book. Students: I'd like to read it.

Teacher: This is a great movie. Students: I'd like to watch it.

Communicative drills still focus on one or a limited number of structures or functions but involve a transfer of information. They may take a number of forms but many require the fulfillment of some task and are therefore satisfying in the sense of achievement that they provide.

Teaching in a Japanese Medical College

Students in a Japanese medical university have already had at least six years experience of studying English. Their passive knowledge is high; it has to be as English is a requirement for the entrance examination. In this college, classes are groups of 25, mostly young adults about the same age, and most from fairly similar backgrounds both academically and socially. Their language needs are often similar: they need confidence, greater phonological awareness and practice in listening and production, especially speaking. Despite extensive knowledge of English grammar some students are unable to use English in any realistic, communicative way; they are those who have learnt English for

examination purposes and have only had to memorise sentence patterns and master the techniques of taking examinations. Although lacking in communication skills, the students rarely have to be taught structure and purely mechanical, structural drills are not useful except for pronunciation and other phonological aspects. Indeed, these students have spent much time already doing structure drills, but on paper rather than orally.

With students who are reluctant to speak, drilling gives a boost to their confidence, and increases a sense of being part of the group, in itself effective in encouraging participation and language use. Choral drilling allows time for weaker students to make mistakes within the anonymity of the group and allows the practice necessary get their mouths around new structures

Due to the monolingual and relatively homogeneous nature of the classes, it is possible to predict problems of stress of phonology and use drilling to teach or for remedial purposes. Drills allow students to practice certain phonemes, such as /θ/or/r/, that regularly cause problems for Japanese speakers of English. Students are made more aware of stress and intonation by beating stress with the hand whilst speaking. The results of catenation, especially contractions, weak forms, and the frequency of the schwa, /ə/, are highlighted by back-chain drilling where the students repeat an utterance in a series of steps, beginning with the last word or phoneme; each step includes the preceding sound until the utterance is repeated as it said rather it would be read aloud. Such a drill practises a number of aspects that are absent from the written form: the importance of stress to highlight information words, the use of destressed syllables, intonation and elision. Students may notice these features in listening passages but are very reluctant to practice them without the safety of the group chorus. Another example might be, when a teaching requests. In many languages such as Japanese, polite register is marked by the use of specific structures and vocabulary; in English, however, 'Could I have a cup of coffee?' would sound rude with a flat monotone even if 'please' were added to the question, but correct stress and a rising intonation make it polite.

All the students have an extensive passive knowledge of English which often has to be activated. Communicative drills are extremely effective in doing this and giving controlled practise before going on to freer speaking activities. Many language items can be practiced in this way, and there is a range of activities that can be used.

Drilling a simple question such as 'Have you ever been abroad?' or 'What did you do yesterday?' becomes communicative when it is repeated to different members of the class, each giving their own answer. Questionnaires or surveys can be used in similar fashion.

These kind of drills are sometimes referred to as humanistic as the focus is less on language and more on obtaining information from fellow students.

Using pictures in pairs can be used to practise a range of different exponents such as making comparisons, talking about changes or describing objects. In the last example, the question 'What's it for?' is drilled chorally for form, and then practised, actually drilled communicatively, in a game in which a student picks a card with a picture of a common object while his partners have to discover its nature and use by using the target structure.

Many of the games used in the language classroom involve a limited use of language functions and structures and are, therefore, extended drills.

Cue cards are also useful for teaching functions; they elicit predetermined language functions although the actual exponents cannot be predicted. For example when teaching offers, a student with a cue card from which he reads, 'Phew! I'm very hot and thirsty' should elicit an offer from the student such as 'Would you like me to open the window?', or 'Shall I get you a drink of water?' Activities like this also remind students that a statement is never neutral but can be used as a request, a complaint or some other function, as the same card could be used elicit, for example, exponents of advice. Sometimes, when using such cards, the 'wrong' kind of function is produced by the student, an invitation instead of an offer; this emphasises the meaningful feature of the drill, that students are listening to each other.

An advantage to these communicative and humanistic drills is that they allow the students to move around the room, thereby changing the pace of the class, energise the students and remove the focus from the traditional classroom setting. They can also be used to show promote the use of correct body language and movement and, not least, they are fun.

Conclusion

As in any other academic field, methods and beliefs are constantly changing in English language teaching. However, as interest grows in the applications of new technology there is a tendency to ignore, or at least refrain from discussion of, some of the older techniques used in the classroom. While teacher training courses will continue to teach the advantages of oral drilling, teachers should not allow the technique to fossilise. New applications of the different kinds of drilling should be considered along with new drills that suit the language being taught or the first language, past experiences or interests of the students. Used appropriately, drills provide repetitious but meaningful language

practice and have positive effects on student confidence and classroom management

In my current teaching I have found that use of communicative drills to be one of the most effective ways of bridging the gulf between passive knowledge and oral fluency, one that students enjoy and from which they gain confidence in using English.

References

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