

For the Newcomer to TESL

Why Pattern Practice?

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A newcomer to the discipline of teaching English as a second language is often temporarily overwhelmed by the terminology and associated methodology. "Pattern practice," a cornerstone of the audio-lingual method, is a common term encountered in any first reading of text books dealing with English as a second language.

To understand what pattern practice is and why it is emphasized in second-language teaching, it is necessary to examine several basic premises of the audio-lingual method. Perhaps even the term "audio-lingual" is new to many people. One of the most basic concepts involved in this approach and in pattern practice is the idea that listening and speaking should be taught first, then reading and writing. Oral language should be taught first because it is the primary basis of communication. The name "audio-lingual" is derived from this emphasis on oral language. The primacy of spoken language may be demonstrated by the fact that everyone can speak a language but not all people can write one. Certainly all learn to speak before we learn to write. Closely related to the "oral first" injunction is another basic premise which states that language learning is not concerned with problem solving (grammatical analysis and memorizing of language rules as in traditional language teaching) but with the formation of habits.

The special emphasis of the audio-lingual approach and some aspects of the dichotomy that exists between it and traditional language teaching have been stated rather succinctly by Robert Lado in *Language Teaching* (1964). "Knowing words, individual sentences, and/or rules of grammar does not constitute knowing the language.

Talking about language is not knowing it. The linguist, the grammarian, the critic talk about the language; the student must learn to use it. To know the language is to use its patterns of construction with appropriate vocabulary at normal speed for communication. Understanding or verbalizing a pattern may help the student to learn but will never take the place of practicing the patterns through analogy, variation, and the transformation to establish them as habits." (p.51)

Pattern Practice Defined

Pattern practice is one of the key approaches to the development of language habits in the language learner. "Pattern practice," according to Mary Finocchiaro in *English as a Second Language: From Theory to Practice* (1964), is the use of "drills and activities in which the patterns of a language are learned to the point where students can repeat, alter, or respond to them habitually and fluently." (p. 134) Nelson Brooks in *Language and Language Learning* (1964) says of pattern practice, "It is . . . exercise in structural dexterity undertaken solely for the sake of practice, in order that performance may become habitual and automatic--as it must be when the mind concentrates on the message rather than on the phenomena that convey it." (p. 146) Examination of other common methodology books in the subject area will reveal considerable agreement with the three statements quoted.

Key points related to the definition of pattern practice might be listed as follows:

(Continued on Page 10)

Pattern Practice Develops Habits--

(Continued From Page 7)

Pattern Practice

- 1) is entirely oral.
- 2) is a closely controlled substitution of elements within sentences.
- 3) is designed to develop habits on an unconscious level--to be automatic.
- 4) is often designed to draw the student's active attention away from the structural point being mastered.

Pattern practice has taken many forms as teachers have sought to add variety, interest, and flexibility to the activity. Some common forms are repetition, replacement, completion, transposition, expansion, and transformation, just to mention a few. To further clarify the definitions of

pattern practice previously given, let us study the following simple example of a substitution exercise.

(Note that the basic sentence pattern remains the same, but the word in the slot changes. The student is really practicing a "do" question structure while his attention is focused on the slot.)

Teacher: Do
Do you see the truck?

Train
Do you see the train?

Ship
Do you see the ship?
(Cue by teacher, response by the class)

Teacher: Bell
Did he hear the bell?
Ship
Did he hear the ship?
Car
Did he hear the car?

Dog
Did he hear the dog?

Many words might be expended on this and other types of pattern practice, and how to use them effectively; this is not, however, the purpose of this paper.

Once one has accepted habit formation through pattern practice rather than language analysis as a proper activity for a beginning-English classroom, the possibilities of the method can be suggested rather easily. A class may produce 20-25 sentences per minute following cues supplied by the teacher. This represents 1000-1250 recitations in a 50 minute period. In a grammar-translation class, by comparison, a student on an individual basis might recite one time in a minute, producing 50 recitations in a 50 minute period.

Traditional grammar rules, if linguistically sound, are still given to the student learning English as a sec-

ond language. However in the initial stages when aural-oral skills are emphasized, rules are mentioned, generally, only after a student has had sustained practice in using the structure the rule refers to; even then, rules receive relatively little of the time devoted to language teaching.

If oral language is primary and necessarily must be learned before reading and writing, then some economical method of developing the necessary habits must be used. In the audio-lingual approach, this is "pattern practice."
