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The Utterance-Response Method to Pattern Drill

BY JASON B. ALTER

The Utterance-Response approach represents an attempt to improve upon and go beyond the traditional or ordinary structural drill or pattern drill. Utterance-Response drills provide the quality of meaningful context and utilize natural, realistic language, thereby acquainting the student with patterns, in settings, that he can actually use outside the confines of the classroom. The drills are most palatable, both to student and instructor.

This approach is embodied in a set of materials that Mr. Roy Collier, Mrs. Miho Tanaka Steinberg, and I began to work on in the winter of 1964 for use at the English Language Institute, University of Hawaii. We sought to use language and patterns that were more natural and less stilted or awkward, intentionally avoiding the overly formal, the text-bookish, and the prescriptive.

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Here are some examples from an actual drill. This is part of Practice 2, Unit 8, one of two units that emphasize drills on "-Ing" and "To" verbs following other verbs.

1. Did Susan have time to wash the dishes? (Almost!) She didn't quite finish washing them.
2. Did Bill have time to write the term paper? He didn't quite finish writing it.

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3. Did Ruth have time to address the envelopes? She didn't quite finish addressing them.
4. Did Dad have time to read the paper? He didn't quite finish reading it.
5. Did Jack have time to figure his income tax? He didn't quite finish figuring it.

The utterances are in black print; the responses in brown. This draws

attention to the two-person, give-and-take arrangement of the drills. All the responses are printed in the text, enabling the student to practice the correct responses at home; this is in accord with the philosophy that we should be doing more teaching and less testing. In class the text is seldom open, except at the very introduction of the drill.

All of the grammatical items at issue are presented in the responses, not in the utterances. Italics and arrows indicate these items in the first response in every regular exercise; in pattern testing exercises the first two responses are so marked. In the drill in question both "finish" and "washing" are italicized, marked by a single arrow.

This article is based upon Mr. Alter's speech delivered at the NAFSA Conference in San Francisco on May 3, 1968.

Notice that the student has other things to worry about besides the grammar points; namely, pronoun shifts in both subject and object. "Susan" becomes "she," and "dishes" becomes "them." Wherever possible we forced such changes, to avoid monotony and to add a challenge.

The utterance serves merely to elicit the response. In many cases the utterance is a statement, and the response is a question. The student is thereby given ample opportunity to phrase questions in English, a feature that is sometimes neglected. In several drills the utterance is a statement, and the response is also a statement. For example, again from Unit 8:

Utterance. I hate to write letters.

Response. I don't mind writing them.

The goal is to give the student experience with all sorts of combinations, rather than the hackneyed question-answer syndrome alone.

The listening comprehension aspect of the Utterance-Response approach needs mention. The varied nature of the drills challenges the student to listen carefully to the

utterance. Giving the proper response requires more than simple substitution. In this era of large lecture courses, the student spends a major portion of his time listening, but may seldom have a chance to speak. Given the foreign student's reluctance to ask questions in the classroom (even truer in his non-ELI classes), it is essential that we build his listening ability.

Cues Eliminated

Utterance-Response drills have all but eliminated the need for artificial cues. In effect, the entire utterance is a cue, and a natural one. The student is never faced with the following type of drill:

Instructor: Whatever she serves is all right with me (does)

Student: Whatever she does is all right with me.

Instructor: (the children)

Student: Whatever the children do is all right with me.

Virtually never would the foreign student (or any student) be asked, outside the language classroom, to engage in this sort of interchange. Therefore, why have the student practice something that he will never use? Instead, each Utterance-Response

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pair is arranged in the form of a two-line dialogue. An Utterance-Response version of the above would go like this:

- U. What's Helen serving?
R. Whatever she serves is all right with me.
- U. What're the children doing?
R. Whatever they do is all right with me.

This smacks more of communication, which is supposed to be the name of the game.

The Utterance-Response drills are a part of the saturation process that should characterize the language classroom. The student should not be given time to think in his own language. The nature of intensive language activity suggested here seems to indicate that communication is indeed going on. As the drilling on a particular practice proceeds to its later stages, as the class seems to be catching on, the instructor begins to probe and check on comprehension by asking impromptu questions on various items in the drill. These questions are rapidly interspersed with the actual drilling. This procedure adds a spontaneous quality and forces the student to think about the meaning of the Utterance-Response pair more deeply.