

# Drills in Language Teaching

by Mae McCaul

The redundancy in language is one reason why a native speaker learns to use his language at an early age. The language becomes a part of a child long before he is able to verbalize, and because of the redundancy he knows the sentence patterns at an early age. The non-native speakers do not have this advantage, therefore, the teachers of English as a second language have devised drills to replace the redundancy found in the language learning of the native speakers.

Drills are very helpful tools when they are placed in the hands of an imaginative teacher who is able to create variety. Otherwise, they will degenerate into mechanical repetitions which will become extremely boring and inefficient. The Institute of Technology, as well as experienced teachers, has questioned the benefits of drill exercises which exceed fifteen minutes at a time. To be effective the fifteen minute drill period should be related to the lecture or the written work covered or to be covered in the lesson. There are many beneficial drills, but Pamela M. Riley points out in her article, "Variation in Structure Drills" that drills that involve a social situation and language in context are far more beneficial in helping the students understand, and use his new language effectively.

Students enjoy drills, and the teacher should make the drills contextualised, situational and interesting. The primary aim in the use of drills is for the student to be able to transfer his drill habits into his conversation. In order to accomplish this it is necessary for the student to be intellectually and, if possible, emotionally involved in the activity.

Those who teach English as a second language agree that oral drills are more effective than written drills.

If there is to be more than one drill practice one drill carefully before moving to the next one. It is recommended that the students practice drill number one until it is fully understood, then move on to drill number two. Before going to drill number three, review drill number one and two. Students who need extra help can listen to drills on tape or on the language master. However, it is advisable for students to

practice only the drills that have been done with the teacher in the classroom.

Some of the drill practices that have been used successfully are discussed in the following paragraphs. These are basic drills which can be expanded and improvised to meet the teacher's need. Harold V. King has four drills that he recommends in his article "Oral Grammar Drills."

*The Straight Pattern Practice.* The teacher drills the grammatical pattern she wishes to emphasize until it is learned. She then makes a vocabulary change while leaving the grammatical structure the same. M.J. Paine refers to this as the "fixed increment" drill in his article "The Variation of Classroom Drill Techniques." It follows the straight pattern practice drill and is referred to as "the most flexible drill."

*Progressive Pattern Practice.* The students are given words which they must place correctly within the sentence. This drill provides a great variety of grammatical material.

*Substitute Concord Drill.* The student has to make grammatical changes depending upon the phrases given him. For example, in a verb substitute situation the student would have to use the two forms of a verb

## TESL Reporter

A quarterly publication of the English Language Institute and the BATESL program of The Church College of Hawaii.

Editor . . . ., Mrs. Alice Pack, Assistant Professor of English and TESL.  
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Articles relevant to teaching English as a second language in Hawaii, the South Pacific and Asia, may be submitted to the editor through Box 157, The Church College of Hawaii, Laie, Hawaii 96762. Manuscripts should be double-spaced and typed, not exceeding five pages.

in a sentence. Example: "They're eating the same thing they ate yesterday."

**Question and Answer Drill.** In this drill he advocates a naturalistic approach as compared with the mechanical approach which is often used in a question and answer drill. One of his examples is:

Teacher: "Why don't the children play something for us?"

Student: "They forgot to bring their instruments."

The mechanical and naturalistic responses are discussed at length in "Writing Language Laboratory and Classroom Drills," by B. Woolrich. He prefers the naturalistic drill to the mechanical because he believes there is a definite link in context or sense between stimulus and response.

One of his drills is the *sound effect prompts*. In this drill the teacher records various sounds and asks questions concerning the sound. For example, the teacher plays the sound of a car on the tape. The students listen and the teacher asks, "Where is the man?" The naturalistic response would be, "In the car."

"Drills Should be Fun" by Hana Ray discusses several types of drills which involve gestures and the acting out of dialogue. In the gesture drill the structure must first be presented in a memorable situation in the relationship of gestures and words. Sneeze, scream, grin, and cough are examples of what could be used. When the sound or gesture is given the students respond with the word.

In an *acting drill* she suggests that dolls be used to illustrate dialogue. The background for the setting (rainy day, sunny day, moon shining, thunder et cetera) should be drawn on the blackboard behind the dolls.

Many improvisations can be made. In the acting drill the students could emerge in free dialogue with one another in the same setting.

Pamela M. Riley rates *dialogue drills* high on her preferences for drills. In her article "Variation in Structure Drills" she believes that in this type of drill the student is practicing "pronunciation, stress, intonation and rhythm, as well as learning the pattern of carrying on a conversation."

The drills in *English As a Second Language* by Mary Finnacchiaro move the student through mechanical drills and naturalistic drills until he finally emerges into free response.

Regardless of the type drill chosen to use

variety is the key in drilling. The greater the variety the less boredom and hopefully the greater results. Original instruction is important.

The student should always be given explicit examples in each drilling situation. Every student should understand what is to be done and how to do it in order for the drilling to be meaningful.

It would be difficult to rate one type of drill superior to another. Different types may be used more effectively in one situation or level of learning than another. All work toward the goal of free response where a student is able to communicate effectively.

Drills can be beneficial tools in teaching English as a second language. Clarity, variety, and time spent on drilling are important factors to consider in teaching the student to learn and transfer classroom knowledge to communication.

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