

# A Method of Using Substitution and Transformation Drills for Group Work

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One of the most important aspects of teaching a structure is giving the pupil automatic mechanical control over it. This is of course only one aspect: the pupil must know not only how to use it, but when to use it. The latter he learns in a variety of ways. He can learn short dialogues which highlight by their dramatic content the contextual meaning of the structure and thus help to fix it in his mind; he consolidates and further defines his understanding of it as he meets it in a variety of contexts in his reading and listening; he uses it in speech and writing. But he must also be taught to recognise and feel it as a pattern, and to use it, unhampered by certainty of its form, automatically.

How can this automatic control of the mechanics of a structure be achieved? If we rely solely on random occurrences read or heard, and on his often faltering attempts to reproduce them, we cannot be at all sure that automatic control will be achieved; it will certainly be less systematic, and take longer. We often put our faith in exercises such as those in *Living English Structure* but these are rather tests than drills; if we use them *instead of* drills, we will find our pupils struggling to apply rules and other criteria where they should be getting the sentences right with a minimum of thought because they feel right that way, or at least because the alternatives which occur to them feel wrong. The application of rules is only appropriate where one is in doubt about one's automatic response. If used alone, it hampers, rather than encourages, automatic control.

A drill enables each pupil to get the sentence right by presenting a model sentence and giving him the material to change it minimally. For example:

*Purpose of Drill:* To drill the correct use of the direct and indirect objects after certain verbs.

*Model Sentence:* I have given him the book  
(Repeated till all pupils can say it without trouble)

*Teacher:* Pen

*Pupil:* I have given him the pen

*Teacher:* Pencil

*Pupil:* I have given him the pencil

etc.

Later we substitute words for 'him' (eg her, them, you, John, my brother etc.) and 'given' (lent, sent, bought etc.)

It is clear that this will enable the student to produce correct sentences without the applications of abstract rules. Compare it, however, with the following type of exercises:

1. I have given..... (the book, he)
2. John has bought..... (his mother, it)

Here the pupil has to work out each sentence individually: he has to decide between two alternative forms (eg *I have given him the book; I have given the book to him*); he has to decide on the appropriate form of the pronoun. The sequence gives him no help. 'But why should it? Surely this is spoon-feeding? Isn't it better that he should learn to work it out?' These are all possible objections. But the answer is that such laborious application of rules takes a long time to produce the automatic control of language the pupil must have if he is to be able to concentrate on the meaning of what he is saying. Such exercises are only of any use to test this automatic control: we can only do them usefully when the correct forms echo in our ears from many repetitions. They are, in short, tests, not drills. 'But such automatic drills take no account of meaning ..' Do exercises? They do, it is true, force the pupil to think. But he is not usually thinking about

conveying a meaning so much as about applying the rules. When the patterns have become automatic, he may indeed systematise his knowledge and apply it to exercise. But only where this helps him.

To summarise, we must first present the structure in a meaningful situation; then drill it; then subject the pupil to more varied stimuli (as in an exercise or controlled composition), leading on towards the random use of structure in freer writing and conversation and, let this not be forgotten, in understanding.

The type of drill I am discussing is a means of practising a structure (pattern) by obtaining the greatest possible number of repetitions of the pattern with the minimum occurrence of mistakes. Obviously, if a pupil repeats the pattern 50 times, it has much more chance of becoming a habit than if he repeats it 5 times.

The object is therefore to give each pupil the maximum number of repetitions. Class and group choral drills, using rhythm to keep the class or group together, are one obvious way of doing this. Rapid individual answers on a class basis are necessary if the teacher is to check the progress of the individual. A language laboratory, where each pupil responds individually, and the teacher can monitor them one at a time, would be the ideal; the pupils are all responding all the time, and the form of the drills reduces mistakes to the minimum; the correct form is also given on the tape.

But if we have no language laboratory, what can we do to achieve the greatest number of individual responses? One obvious answer is competitive group work. We are aiming for the greatest number of individual responses, and competition is one way of motivating speed. The problem is how one teacher can supply the material simultaneously for five groups competing with one another to achieve the greatest number of repetitions of the pattern. My suggestion is the following. We will

assume that the class consists of 30 pupils. This can be divided into 5 groups of 6. The teacher prepares the drills on cards, a different one for each group, though all of the same standard. Each card contains material for 20 or 30 repetitions of the pattern. Each substitution is numbered. A very simple example might be the following:

I have given	the book	to John
9. lent	6. the letter	1. Mary
10. sent	7. the money	2. the teacher
etc.	8. the ball	3. my father
		4. those boys
		5. your friend

Having prepared the five different cards, the teacher distributes one to each group leader. Group leaders should of course be practised in calling out the words for substitution and seeing that each member of their group repeats the same number of examples. While practice is in progress, the teacher will listen to each group in turn. The first group to finish its card calls the teacher; other group leaders record how many their group has done; then each group passes on its card to the next group, and the drilling and competition continue.

Since spaced practice is preferable to long sessions of drill, one or two cards a day (or however often the teacher decides) will be enough. Scores are kept and the competition continues on a weekly or monthly basis.

What the teacher is in fact doing is preparing a *numbered* substitution table. Graded sets of cards can be prepared by the teacher on any structure which causes difficulty, or any structure, and the cards can, of course, be kept by the teacher for use in succeeding years.

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