

Drilling Should and Can be Fun

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The Concept of Language Learning as habit formation (mainly under the influence of Skinner's behaviourist theories) has led to the widespread use of repetitive drills, not only in the U.S.A., where they were first systematically developed in the 'mim-mem' method, but in many parts of the world. In recent years we have been warned not only by teachers but also by psychologists, notably Wilga Rivers,¹ against the exclusive use of drilling. In order to ensure transfer of habits acquired through drills, the pupil must participate actively in language practice, must be intellectually and, if possible, emotionally involved. Thus the teacher is faced with the problem of how to make drilling contextualised, situational, interesting.

Adult pupils are often so strongly motivated that verbal cues may be sufficient to keep them attentive. However, even such students appreciate the variety provided by visual aids and greatly benefit from it. For poorly motivated students, for pupils of limited ability, and for the young, drilling must be made enjoyable, otherwise it will soon lead to boredom, and a negative attitude will ruin all chances of success. However, when visual aids are introduced, teachers tend to be carried

away by the possibilities they offer, instead of using them merely as a means to the effective drilling of those structures they have planned to teach. The teacher must choose the visual aids according to what he wishes to teach, and remain master of the situation.

The greater the teacher's control over the visual aids, the better they can be exploited.² The teacher's gestures, his or his pupils' acting, are the most effective visual aids. We know they help us create real-life situations in the classroom, but how can they be used for drilling? The teacher of young children gradually evolves a whole series of symbolic gestures, which pupils will accept as denoting, for instance, playing, working, speaking, listening, walking, running, dressing, washing, eating, drinking — the list of possibilities is very long. Any action which can be suggested by means of a symbolical gesture can thus be used in quick drills, not only for the present continuous (affirmative, negative, interrogative) but also for the present simple (if the habit factor is made clear), the past simple and continuous, the present and past perfect and the future. Of course, the structure must first be presented in memorable situations and its use grasped by the pupils, and the symbolical actions must

¹Wilga M. Rivers, *The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher*, University of Chicago Press.

²See the table provided by S. Pit Corder in 'The Visual Element in Language Teaching' (Longmans).

then be presented in a way that will warrant the use of the structure. For example, the past perfect can be drilled by the teacher performing two consecutive actions, if possible logically linked, such as those indicated in *When she had finished arranging the flowers, she looked out of the window*, and the pupils interpreting them. Since choral drilling is recommended and the interpretations might vary, one pupil gives the interpretation and the teacher accepts it with a nod, which is the signal for choral repetition. To keep the drill brisk and lively, the teacher must think out his sequences carefully, and introduce humour or suspense. (For instance, *After he had stabbed the man, he stole the money.*) Care must be taken not to introduce new words when drilling a new structure. Later, when the pupils are familiar with the structure, relatively new words from the reading material can be incorporated. If the teacher uses gestures and acting in his presentation (explanation) of new words, he can easily use the same gestures when reviewing the words. This applies not only to verbs (e.g. *you have coughed ... sneezed ... screamed ... grinned* – notice, not so elementary!), but also to adjectives, ranging from the simple *You are hungry ... tired ... angry ... afraid of us ...* – to *arrogant ... diffident ... clumsy ... bewildered*. The possibilities are endless: we can drill even such complicated structures as *You seem to be arrogant* or *Stop being arrogant*. The teacher of intermediate and advanced students should learn from the elementary-school teacher the effective use of gesture and acting to make drills enjoyable.

Many teachers are familiar with the use of objects for drilling. However, they tend to keep to the conventional books, pens, and pencils, forgetting that most pupils hate the sight of them. Why not bring in more interesting objects, such as toy aeroplanes, ships, dogs, cats, birds? Are they not on the list of the first fifty words to be taught? I believe that lexical grading need not be as strict as structural grading, in the teaching of speech. Words that will appear anyway in the first year of the course may be introduced early, if we happen to have the objects at hand. Nor is it always the short 'simple' word which is memorable; interest plays a vital part. The Australian situational method¹ demands the use of a teaching kit, with a variety of useful objects for drills. Here is an opportunity to teach such useful everyday words as *nail, soap, towel, ash-tray, a piece of string*. But for younger children (and deprived children, who seem to remain emotionally young) toy animals, flowers, toy furniture, etc., provide additional motivation. I have a little house and an all-purpose cowshed, and dolls and toy animals go in and out (excellent for the drilling of all prepositions), jump up on the roof and down again, the

tiny elephant (a highly demonstrable item) and the huge mouse always ensuring a full measure of attention and concentration. It is possible to use substitution and drill various structures. For instance, an identical series of actions is performed by several animals, and the pupils report: *The dog/cat/elephant/went to the cowshed, it opened the door, it went into the cowshed, it shut the door, it ran round the cowshed, it jumped out of the cowshed*. The pupils themselves are allowed to handle the objects, as the class reports chorally. This is fully contextualised substitution drill. What wonderful possibilities a doll's house would present, in the teaching of useful vocabulary, the drilling of structures, and dramatisation!

We have a family of dolls. Family relationships are drilled without fear of hurting the motherless or fatherless child, and we gradually learn to describe our dolls more and more fully. They help us drill the following patterns:

He is small (fat, ugly, etc.).
He has blonde hair, red shoes, a black hat, etc.
His jacket is black, his shoes are clean . . .
He is sitting (standing, running, jumping, etc.).
He is behind the chair. (All prepositions).
He is kissing her. She is kissing him.
He is giving her a book.

Sometimes we just talk about them and the children choose from the stock of sentences they have learnt through drills, thus taking the first step towards real communication and creative speech. Then we have George, the glove-puppet monkey, who answers when the children ask him questions, in all tenses. By the way, our dolls converse, and their conversations are reported (in reported speech), even in the top form of the secondary school.

Why not combine objects (dolls, toys) with a large blackboard drawing, serving as the background to a story? The drawing is prepared by a different pupil each time, but we have the same picture: a house on the seashore, with a garden and a wood beyond it. Sometimes it is daytime and sometimes night-time (*sun/moon*), while sometimes there is rain or even thunder and lightning. Our dolls move against the background of the colour scene (which we describe, drilling whichever structure is being taught at the time) and the children provide a running commentary about their activities. It begins very simply, but gradually develops into a story. For instance: *Mary is picking flowers. A snake is coming out of the grass.* (Chorally, in a stage whisper, dramatically) *She is calling: Help! Help!* (A different pupil each time, very exciting) *The cat is running* (chorally, three times, in-

6 ¹ See *Situational English Teacher's Book* (The Commonwealth Office of Education, Australia).

creasing the speed) *The cat is jumping on the back of the snake. It is eating the snake. Mary is kissing the cat. She is saying: Thank you, my dear!* (individual). And now on the other side of the blackboard, we have the same sequence: a crocodile and the dog – exact substitution, as dramatic as the first. This is just one of many stories, built up by way of drill, with never a dull moment. They can be taped, ‘acted’ for the parents, re-told in the past tense, foretold in the future. Drawing on the blackboard, especially when accompanied by a running commentary in the form of drill, as suggested by F.L. Billows,¹ is excellent in providing cues; but there are teachers for whom even matchstick drawings are a problem. The pupil-prepared blackboard drawing, combined with the use of dolls, incidentally solves this problem, while opening up new possibilities for exciting drill.

Most teachers are by now familiar with the flannel-board and the plastic board: they are very effective for drilling, provided we have the sandpaper-backed cut-outs or plastic figures we need. The most convenient of all is the tin board: all we need are a few small magnets which enable us to put up in a split second picture after picture, magazine cut-outs or any others. For instance, at a more advanced level, a series of pictures, arranged in twos, can be put up: one showing an old man or woman, and beside it the picture of a child, doing something. The pupils are taught to respond: *When he/she was young, he/she used to ...* Endless combinations are possible on the

¹F.L. Billows demonstrates in the ‘View and Teach’ film (No. 6 of the First Series).

²Picture flashcards (252 cards) – Follet’s, Michigan Bookstore, 322 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

‘magnetic board’, with minimum preparation. Just go through old magazines, and you’ll soon collect ideas for lively drills.

Picture flashcards,² action series,³ posters for the teaching of structures,⁴ picture stories,⁵ are all useful visual aids for drilling. Film-strips can also be used, at different levels. This work really needs to be demonstrated, to show the advantages of speed and rhythm in drilling. These visual aids must be used judiciously, as they tend to become boring if used too often. Variety in drilling is possible by dividing the class into groups speaking to each other (even chorally arguing), varying the pitch of the voice (gradual crescendo and diminuendo can make almost any sentence sound dramatic), and by choral and individual response alternating, sometimes even in the form of a dialogue.

This account of possible visual aids for contextualising drills is by no means exhaustive. It is not the ingenuity of the teacher in devising visual aids that will count, in the long run, but the way he uses them: the care with which he plans his work and leads his pupils, step by step, from the simple, basic structures to the more complex ones, and from simple repetitive drill to real communication, by gradually relaxing his guidance and by allowing the pupils more and more freedom to make their own comments and express their own ideas.

³*Situational English*, Language Picture Series, Longmans.

⁴*Posters for the Teaching of Structures*, printed in Israel by the Institute for Teaching Aids, Eilat Str. 59, Tel Aviv.

⁵D. Byrne, *Progressive Picture Compositions*, Longmans.