

The Tape-recorder in English-teaching

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The use in English-teaching of the more sophisticated teaching aids, including the tape-recorder, is far more limited than one would expect in this technological age. We all believe in the miracles that these aids can perform but comparatively few teachers actually go into the classroom and make the miracles happen – it is a belief “more honoured in the breach than the observance”. Although many secondary school possesses its own radio, film-projector, and tape-recorder it is, nevertheless, an experience to see one of these aids actually being used in an English lesson. This article will, I hope, encourage at least a few teacher to use a little technology in their English lessons.

A tape-recorder can be used, in language-teaching, for a variety of different purposes and in a variety of different activities. It is most commonly used for drill work – both in language structure and speechwork, and in creative language work.

A. Language structure drills and pronunciation practice

Most oral classroom drills can be effectively presented on tape. Drills of the repetition, question-and-answer, substitution, and transformation types and, in speechwork, both discrimination and production exercises, are particularly suitable. There are a few non-starters. I would not, for example, use a tape-recorder for a fill-in-the-blanks drill, or for a find-the-mistake exercise. The former is difficult to present properly on tape because

of the un-natural pauses involved and the latter, in presenting mistakes orally is as liable to lead to reinforcement of the error as to its correction.

Many taped structure and pronunciation drills are now available commercially. But it is quite possible to produce one's own drills, and, although quite a lot of time is required, there are quite definite advantages to be gained. The more important of these are:

1. Drills prepared in advance of a lesson will usually be of a higher standard than these conducted ‘live’ in class. Preparation will usually have been more thorough, and mistakes will have been eliminated by re-recording.
2. The taped drill will give a consistent model or stimulus (This is especially important, of course, in pronunciation work.) Replayed once, twice or ten times, it will not vary in tone, stress or intonation. A ‘live’ drill in class often includes e.g. widely-differing intonation patterns.
3. A variety of voices can be introduced. This not only is more likely to hold pupils’ interest, but also performs the valuable service of accustoming pupils to different voices.
4. The teacher can concentrate exclusively on error detection and correction.
5. Mobility is achieved. The teacher can move around the class at will.

Add to these such things as the possibility of using the same drill in two or more different classes and the lack of

wear and tear on the teacher's voice in class, and you find yourself with a very considerable list of advantages. And what you lose is really very little, certainly less than you lose in using a radio lesson. Although some element of personal contact is lost, you are still there in the classroom, you still control the speed of the teaching, you can still go back and repeat points which cause difficulty.

Writing your own drills

1. *Integration of drills with other work*

Taped drills must always be properly integrated with other teaching activities, and must not be used in isolation. Structure drills on tape, for example, will be used to practise teaching points already presented 'live' in class.

Giving instructions on tape

Instructions should be brief and clear. Avoid using technical or grammatical terms. Often, the most effective instructions are these given in the form of examples:

e.g. V.1: Listen to this example. Listen.

What's Peter doing now? Sleep.

V.2: He's sleeping.

V.1: He's sleeping.

The teacher's voice (V.1) gives the basic sentence and cue-word.

The second voice (V.2) shows what sort of response is expected.

Finally V.1 gives the correct response.

3. *The drill proper*

A short instruction from the teacher like:

'Now do these the same way'

is now given to start off the drill proper. The sentence used in the example is often repeated as the first sentence in the drill to ensure a smooth beginning, e.g.

V.1: Now do these the same way.

What's Peter doing now? Sleep.

(Pause for pupils' response)

V.1: He's sleeping.

What's Mary doing now? Work.

(Pause for pupils' response)

V.1: She's working. , etc.

V.1: continues to give basic sentences, cue words and correct responses, as in the examples. V.2 is not needed as it was merely used in the example to show pupils what to do.

4. *Length of drill*

This depends on the difficulty of the teaching point involved, but normally between six and ten sentences are given. It is better to use a series of short drills covering various aspects of a teaching point than one long drill covering only one aspect.

5. *3-phase and 4-phase drills*

The most commonly-used drills, like the example given above, are of the '3-phase' type, i.e. made up of:

1. Stimulus (basic sentence and/or cue-word)

2. Pupils' response.

3. Correct response.

If necessary, a 4th phase can be added — repetition of the correct response — but this tends to be wasteful of time and is more useful in the language laboratory where students are working independently than in a classroom situation.

6. *Length of a drill session*

A drill session, using a tape-recorder, should not exceed 15–20 minutes. After this, a law of diminishing returns operates, since the mechanical nature of the activity becomes boring for the pupils.

B. Creative language work

I now want to look at the use of the tape-recorder in a rather different role — in creative language work — and to introduce the idea of pupils recording material prepared by themselves.

The only opportunity many pupils have of using their English creatively is in composition lessons. But since their knowledge is limited, they need careful guidance if they are not to get out of their lexical and structural depth. This results very often in composition work becoming a very formal and unproductive exercise with the teacher exercising too tight a control in the planning stage. Since there is also a tendency to make composition a purely written exercise and a once-a-week activity it is hardly surprising to find pupils in the senior forms who write stereotyped essays and can barely communicate orally.

Part of the solution lies, obviously, in introducing a wider variety of activities, especially oral production activities, and it is in this field that the tape-recorder can be of immense help. What we should try to exploit here is the tape-recorder's ability to perform the basic functions of a broadcasting system by allowing recording as well as playback of material produced by the pupils. All pupils will enjoy recording their own voices. If you also let them write "scripts" for "radio programmes", they will be even more interested.

Dialogues

Many teachers complain that pupils cannot use e.g. a particular sentence pattern properly in their compositions, even though they can cope with the same pattern in a drill situation. This is often due to a lack of practice in using the pattern in a situation which bridges the gap i.e. where

there is something of the control of a drill as well as an element of freedom to use the pattern in a real situation. One method of giving this practice is by the use of short dialogues. Pupils can write these themselves – in groups, for preference – using a situation suggested by the teacher in which the sentence pattern will occur naturally.

e.g. **Pattern: Past continuous**

Situation: Looking for Ahmad

A: Have you seen Ahmad?

B: Yes. I saw him a few minutes ago. He was in the library.

A: What was he doing? Was he working?

B: No, he wasn't. When I saw him he was talking to John.

etc. (up to a length of about 20 lines)

These dialogues can then be recorded by the groups and afterwards played back to the class as a whole. This playback session not only gives pupils the chance to hear what other groups have produced, but also allows the pupils who have taken part in the recordings to hear their own voices. This can be a very salutary experience.

Interviews

An extended and specialised form of dialogue which lends itself to use with a tape-recorder is the interview. Here, the teacher can stress the idea of writing the script for a radio programme – and a few pieces of basic advice, such as the need to use straightforward conversational English, and the importance of avoiding monologues will need to be given. At this stage we are not interested in the unscripted interview. This is a more advanced exercise for the higher classes only. In the early stages, obviously, the pupils themselves will be both interviewers and interviewees. Again the final scripts are recorded and played back to the class as a whole.

Talks

Short oral talks by pupils are quite commonly used in class, and teachers' purposes in asking pupils to give them may be as diverse as administering a termly oral test or exacting oral book reports. The two main drawbacks are usually the self-consciousness of the individual pupil in front of the class and the repetitive nature of the activity (given that few pupils are willing to talk for more than one or two minutes). The tape-recorder can be useful in two ways. It does not make the pupil as self-conscious, and, since a recorded talk can be prepared and recorded in privacy some time in advance, the amount of time which can be taken up by one pupil or one group of pupils can be safely increased. An individual pupil can usually script a five-minute talk. A group of

pupils might manage a fifteen-minute documentary-type programme. Stress must, of course, continue to be laid on the need for a conversational approach rather than a lecturing one. Examples from actual radio programmes should be used in the preparation stage if possible. The subjects chosen for pupils' talks should also be carefully chosen, reflecting their own interests, situation or background.

News report

Another type of 'radio' script which can usefully be practised is the news report. This is particularly useful for practising reported speech and the passive voice, and serves the vital function of keeping these two awkward areas of English-teaching within real situations. We'll hear less of: 'The window was broken by my brother', and more of: 'The meeting was addressed by the Minister'. 'Two cyclists were involved in a road accident'. Like the radio talk, however, the news report is not an easy thing to script successfully, and real-life examples should be carefully studied.

Advertisements

Few pupils will ever become journalists or advertising copy-writers, but practising the skills of these professions in using language can be a very useful language-teaching activity. The examples of 'radio' programmes above – the interview, the radio talk, the news report – can be supplemented by scripts for short advertisements to be 'broadcast' to the rest of the class after recording. Here again, there is some structural 'spin-off' – the passive voice again, in: "X is prepared from full-cream milk"; present tenses, especially the 3rd person singular of the present simple: "Y washes whiter", "Z soothes and satisfies", and so on.

Conclusion

Obviously, all the activities described above are complementary to, and an integral part of, a planned and balanced language-teaching programme. Most, if not all of them, can be attempted as purely written exercises, just as language drills can be given as written exercises. But this is to ignore the vital necessity for oral practice in language-learning.

The tape-recorder offers us one means of giving this vital practice. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself, something to tempt a reluctant teacher away from the traditional pen-and-ink fixation, something to make lessons more interesting for pupils. It is only as useful as we make it, but, with a progressive teacher and an interested class, who knows what miracles may not be made to happen.