

In Defense of Drill Practice

By A. San Shwe Baw

As teachers teaching English as a foreign language, we enjoy sharing our experiences in the language classes with our colleagues whenever conditions permit. Not surprisingly, the most-talked about topic which never fails to broaden our scope of knowledge in the field of teaching is the teaching methodology. Listening to the briefings given by friends regarding the methods they employ to teach certain aspects of the language not only equips us with new or probably even better ways of teaching language but also inspires us to think more creatively when we design our own lessons. These discussions of methodologies, however, are not all the time smooth sailing as there are times when one's preferred methodology churns out nothing but strong opposition from the other party, thereby leaving the one who shares the experience in doubt.

One such occasion is when I discuss the use of drill practice to remedy the mistakes our students make in the structures that have already been taught to them. Their difficulty in not being able to accept this method, I can sense, is their belief that the idea is rather outdated: a method used in the heyday of the structural approach. Many of them tend to drop this idea like a hot potato on the ground that it runs counter to a more modern approach such as CLT. Some express their preference to solve this problem by taking the whole responsibility of explaining the structure analytically in great length, turning the classroom into a totally teacher-centered one.

To make my point more vivid and clear to the readers, I would like to demonstrate some classroom situations where the teachers are trying to remedy the students' frequently-made errors.

SCENE ONE:

English teacher SAN is teaching question words in Basic English I class. He holds up objects and tells the students to ask him "What" question.

Sopon: What that?

SAN : No, think! You've forgotten to use is. Now try again.

Sopon: What that is?

SAN : No, you're not thinking, Mr.Sopon! Think!

SCENE TWO:

English teacher SHWE is asking questions about the extensive reading book, Wuthering Heights, in one of his English II sections. He asked Mr.Pongsak to say something about Catherine Earnshaw.

Pongsak: Although Catherine loved Heathcliff, but she decided to marry Eggar Linton.

SHWE: *The same mistake! The same mistake again! What were you doing when I explained to the whole class last week that only one conjunction is necessary to join two sentences? You cannot use **although** and **but** together in one sentence. How many times do I have to tell you that?*

SCENE THREE:

English teacher BAW asks Ms. Joy why her friend Ms. May is not in class.

Joy: *She went away with her family for the day.*

BAW: *Where did she go?*

Joy : *I'm sorry. I don't know where did she go.*

BAW: *Oh, Ms. Joy, Your grammar is wrong. You're not thinking today. Remember, just before the mid-term exam, you studied direct and indirect speech. You were told that the form of the direct question is **Where did she go?** But when this is made into an indirect question, or when it is a noun clause used as a direct object of the verb – you remember reviewing noun clauses just a few weeks ago, don't you? – then the word order changes to the normal subject-verb order after the question word. You should have answered me by saying **I don't know where she went.** Now, do you think you can remember that?*

The above three scenes illustrate a philosophy of instruction that does not belong in a beginning or intermediate English classroom. Teachers SAN, SHWE, and BAW seem to believe that language learning is an intellectual process: a student needs only to be told the facts. Then, by remembering and thinking carefully, he can use the grammar correctly.

There is no denying the fact that all of the three teachers discussed above have one intention in common: they want their students to master the structures that have been taught to them already. In my opinion, those three teachers are in a most favourable situation where the use of drills will benefit the students most because learning a foreign language, especially in the early stages, is a matter of forming new habits. The old habits (for example, *what that?* or *Although....., but.....*), as direct translations of the equivalent phrases or clauses in the students' native language) get in the way. It will not be helpful to tell the student to think. He is thinking – in his own language!

The situations discussed above are not at all unusual in our classrooms. The methodology I would use in such a situation would be very simple; I would only stick to the old saying "Practice makes perfect" by helping the students form the new habits of the new language through a lot of drill exercises because they need a correct model of the new habit, which can be attained only through plenty of repetition and reinforcement. This cannot be done (as Teacher BAW apparently thinks it can) by *telling* the students the habit, and then talking about it. He may not achieve much by giving long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar.

By definition, habits are learned by doing them. Though a student studying English in countries where English is the mother tongue may not need much deliberate effort to acquire the new habits, our students studying English in Thailand do as there is comparatively little exposure for them to attain the

new habits automatically. So what is left for our students to do is to overlearn foreign language habits. Only a wide range and variety of guided practice may bring the students to a level of spontaneous, habitual use of the new language. If necessary, I might even begin with simple mechanical drills at the beginning – perhaps nothing more than repeating a model, substituting or converting the patterns – always with the control of the drill itself and with guidance from me. The control would be relaxed or removed only when the new habit is firmly established.

There is little doubt that some of my colleagues will regard this idea of using drills rather artificial and old-fashioned. For them, I might be the one kicking against the pricks by trying to move the clock backward. In a way, they might possibly be right, but they must also accept the fact that there is always a rubbish bin patiently waiting for any idea or concept enjoying popularity at the moment. How CLT had received a deadly blow at the hands of its master clearly demonstrates that there is no place for dogmatism in language classrooms. Of course, the idea of using drills discussed in this article reflects one of the characteristics of the Audiolingual Method, where the structural patterns are taught using repetitive drills. But being old may not always mean being useless. Many of today's users of English as a foreign language, including those from the teaching profession, still owe a lot to the Grammar Translation Method or the Audiolingual Method. Thus said, I am not, in any way, opposed to more modern approaches to language teaching. The point is that it is important for the teacher to use whatever technique or approach that seems more promising at a certain situation. It is perfectly understandable that some people argue that drills focus only the students' attention on the grammatical signals rather than on the meaning of the sentences. Here also, what matters is the methodology itself. A resourceful and open-minded teacher may not have much difficulty in using drills creatively so that the sentences are not only formally correct, but also meaningful. To this end, the drills can be presented in such a way that the student's attention is gradually drawn away from the particular structure being practised. If his attention is continually focussed on the problem, we cannot truly say that he is acquiring an automatic habit. It may be necessary, therefore, to begin with drills in which the student is consciously aware of the problem structure and then progress to exercises in which that structure is consistently and correctly elicited while the student is focussing his attention on something else – a series of pictures in a chart, for example.

Pattern practice, understood in this way and supported by suitable materials, can be a powerful and effective tool in the hands of a language teacher who has set his mind on grappling with the students' recurrent common mistakes. The students will also find the activity enriching after producing as many variations of a given pattern as necessary from the model. As a result, there can be little chance of their persisting in an error, as their responses will be constantly reinforced by repetition of the correct sentences. Properly conducted pattern practice thus may ensure that the students are actively engaged in seeing (also hearing) and producing correct sentences throughout an entire class period allotted for remedial purposes.

To sum up, it will be regrettable if we have to let a time-tested technique such as drill practice go unexploited just because we are afraid that other people might regard us old-fashioned. What is important is to help our students learn something out of our teaching, not to take false pride on our part that we are using the most up-to-date method language researchers or whosoever have just discovered. Drills are no panacea, which is an undeniable fact. They simply serve as a means of attack on deeply

internalized errors. But if we have an extra means (however unfashionable) of helping students rid themselves of these errors, then I think we will be doing students an injustice not to use it. So will it be too far-gone to say that our students need guided practice to develop new language habits, and especially, to prevent them from relapsing into the bad habit of making the same structural mistake time and again?

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