

The Use of Drills in the Development of Speaking Skills

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Abstract: Drills are part of foreign language learning process. They provide good practice to promote foreign language learning. Drills will enable learners to give prompt feedback. Learners will learn some concepts quickly and use them effectively in different environments. As drills allow learners to develop dialogues in real communications, they play a significant role to maintain language proficiency. This article sets forth the benefits of using drills in foreign language learning.

Keywords: Drills, Habit, Repetition, Fluency, Accuracy

1. Introduction

Drills were immensely used in the Audio-Lingual method that focused on repetition of grammatical structural patterns through oral practice. A drill is defined as “a type of highly controlled oral practice in which the students respond to a given cue” (Matthews, Spratt & Dangerfield, 1991, p.210).

Drills are one of the best ways for language practice. Drills are useful tools that help learners to use the target language effectively. When students are engaged in drills, they will stand a better chance of developing dialogues in real communications. Drills are interesting and they provide an enjoyable learning environment.

2. The Use of Drills in Language Development

Drills are sources of practice, and will help learners develop automatic responses. When learners are able to provide quick responses, they will become highly motivated; as a result, their foreign language learning process will get easier.

Through repetition, learners form habits. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) comments “the more often something is repeated, the stronger the habit and the greater the learning”. When learners put these habits into practice, they will have an opportunity to maintain proficiency in the target language. Similarly, Rivers argues that “foreign language learning is basically a process of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by giving correct responses rather than be making mistakes. By

memorizing dialogues and performing pattern drills the chances of producing mistakes are minimized” (1964, p.19-22).

Drills are useful language materials to practice language chunks. At the same time, they will allow learners to comprehend language patterns with ease. This facilitating role of drills in foreign language learning will help learners produce the language effectively. Furthermore, drills will build confidence that will enable the learners to provide prompt responses without hesitation in real communications. When learners get it right during drills, they will endeavor to do their best; consequently, drills are useful in that they will keep students focused for a better achievement.

Drills are useful to improve fluency and accuracy. They teach learners how to respond quickly. During second language learning process, accuracy holds an important place. When learners master the language through drills accurately, they will gain accuracy.

Drills in language learning can be used to practice grammatical structures and vocabulary items. For instance:

Teacher: I go to work, He

Students: He goes to work

Teacher: They

Students: They go to work

In this substitution drill learners will see how grammar works. These drills will help learners learn the grammar of the target language accurately. Learning grammar through drills is not source of frustration for learners as they are learnt in an enjoyable learning environment. Furthermore, drills conducted in the classes will contribute to learners’ pronunciation.

In the transformation drills, students need to transform positive sentences into negative sentences, positive sentences into questions, active sentences into passives, or direct sentences into indirect sentences. These drills facilitate learning grammar effectively. Learners see how grammar functions through these drills, and they will master the grammar of the language with fun and ease.

Teacher: I read a book

Students: I don’t read a book

Teacher: He rides a bicycle

Students: He doesn’t ride a bicycle

Abundant repetition in foreign language learning might lead to boredom. Therefore, in order to make drills more motivating in learning process, Spratt (1991, p.10-11) makes some suggestions:

- They should look like real language, containing hesitations, proper social reactions such as exclamations, questions, or comments that require a response. They can even consider register and nonverbal elements.
- The response should not be totally predictable; a variety of responses should be incorporated.
- They should involve genuine reactions between or among the speakers.
- They should be purposeful and based on topics of relevance to students
- They should be sufficiently controlled and allow the teacher to observe how well learning has taken place.
- They should allow for sustained language practice.

One of the disadvantages of drills is learners may repeat without understanding. To minimize errors, and to increase efficiency teachers should control over learners' production. Though it has been to master a foreign language through drills, creating too much time for them in learning process may hinder learners from thinking. It is always useful to provide more varieties so that learners know what to produce in different environments.

3. The Present Study

The present study addressed the need for drills in language teaching. It investigated the role of drills in the development of speaking skills. The students in this study were exposed to a significant amount of L2 in their classes. The present study addressed the following questions:

- 1) Does the use of drills make significant improvement in the development of speaking skills?
- 2) Is the use of drills more effective than the use of course books in the development of speaking skills?

4. Method

4.1 Participants and Instructional Context

The participants in this study were preparatory school students at a university where all classes are conducted in English language. Preparatory school curriculum focuses on the development of basic language skills. Students study course books in all courses along with workbooks to accompany their textbooks. The target population of this study is beginners. In conversation classes, students are required to do all exercises in their textbooks and make 5-minute oral presentations pertaining the topics they cover in their classes. Students receive grammatical instruction in conversation classes but explicit instruction is avoided. Instead, feedback is provided by the lecturer when error occurs. Two groups were created for the present study, and each group included 20 students. While the researcher used the textbook in one of the groups, drills were used in the other group to develop speaking skills of the students. The researcher presented the same materials to both groups. After two months, ten classes of each group were recorded. Each student had to make a 5-minute oral presentation and depending on their performances in all students were given a score. The scoring was done by two lecturers to maintain a fair balance. Students' scores and the accuracy of responses were used as data in the present study. The responses of students were scored out of 100 in terms of grammatical accuracy.

5. Results

Table 1: Percentage of accuracy in oral productions

N=40

Measure	M	SD
Text book based	65.14	14.26
Drill based	72.48	10.63

P<.05

Table 2: Percentage of scores in oral productions

N=40

Measure	M	SD
Text book based	68.74	15.18
Drill based	72.69	10.85

P<.05

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the role of drills in language teaching. Although the achievement of learners did not differ to a large extent, it was found that drills contributed considerably to the enhancement of speaking skills. The t test results demonstrated that compared with text book based instruction, accuracy in drill based instruction is higher (65, 14 compared to 72, 48). In addition to this, compared to scores of learners who were exposed to text based instruction, those learners in the drill based received high scores in their presentations. By means of implicit feedback whilst employing drills, learners had an opportunity to reformulate their responses which allowed them to generate accurate responses. On the other hand, textbooks did not prove effectiveness as much as drills in language learning. Active engagement in the learning process is a key factor as it helps learners practice the language. When learners are immersed in language learning through drills, they experience authentic use of the target language that leads them to use the language both accurately and fluently. Moreover, the learning environment holds a significant place in language learning. It goes without saying that, anxiety-free learning environment positively influences learners and triggers them to learn the target language.

Through practicing language chunks, learners form language habits; therefore, drills will help learners to respond automatically without hesitation. As learners focus on giving prompt responses, they will be able to develop dialogues in real communications. Drills are fun, and motivate learners as they are conducted in an enjoyable learning environment. They will help learners use the language effectively.

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