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DRILLS ARE BACK IN FASHION! THIS TIME WITH TASTE AND STYLE

This paper aims to give the concept of drilling in the teaching of a foreign language a fresher look. Not long ago, all of a sudden drilling went through a process of ostracizing. It was practically banned from EFLT avant-garde contexts which embraced the communicative methodology rather radically. Past the golden age of the audio-lingual methods, drilling was denied a place in language learning. However, language learning theories, and reality itself, have come to its rescue and it has recovered its place.

Especially in more basic levels, more mechanical practices can give students important opportunities to experiment with the language presented, thus making them more confident and secure. At this stage, practice favours both fluency and memorization and naturally leads to accurate and consistent production.

Drills also allow for valuable moments of concept-checking, which proves to be essential in determining the course of the lesson.

On the other hand, acknowledging the place of drills in foreign language learning is not enough when we think of the language as a means to communication. Although the general focus of drills is mainly structures and vocabulary, mechanical practices don't necessarily have to be meaningless and boring. In fact, the more meaningful they are, the more likely students are to relate to them and retain the new linguistic information. The challenge lies on how to turn repetitive exercises into personal expression.

There are ways to make this kind of activities relevant and communicative and this is what this essay will attempt to show. Different possibilities have been devised and will be tackled in a practical manner so as to offer a starting point for adaptation and other applications.

Keywords:EFL teaching, practice, meaningful drills, communicative teaching, controlled practice activities

"Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new."
Walden Henry David Thoreau

Introduction

Not long ago drilling in the teaching of English as a foreign language went from heaven to hell. Past the golden age of the audiolingual methods, drilling was ostracized and was denied a place in language teaching/learning. It was practically banned from English as a Foreign Language Teaching avant-garde contexts which embraced the communicative methodology rather radically at its early stages. However, more recent language learning theories, and reality itself, have come to the rescue of drilling and we can say it is not so tacky any longer.

The intention herewith is to try to give the concept of drilling a fresher look. Only to keep the fashion metaphor, the idea is not to bring back shoulder pads or flowered flare pants, but to show that coats do fit better with the right amount of wadding and that there is a place for some moderate flare in elegant still fashionable pants.

Probably, the first step to give drills a chance to be reborn (or revisited, as some fashionists would put it) would be, perhaps, giving them a new name. According to most dictionaries, drills are defined in a not very flattering way. Definitions are associated to military practices, rigid procedures and repetitive and routine-like actions. This does not necessarily favor drills' figure or image.

However, as these specific types of activities have proved to be quite successful in developing efficiency in a number of more mechanical actions and processes, we could also identify a place for them in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. In fact, this is what audiolingual methods brought forward as an innovation some decades ago. Can we actually go against the idea that constant use and practice do contribute to the consolidation of knowledge, actions and procedures? Can we deny that more mechanical practices can help realize, formalize, internalize, incorporate, integrate, or assimilate actions, knowledge or procedures leading to the mastering of some kind of skill? If so, why have audiolingual methods been abandoned? This is what I will attempt to discuss in this article. Can teachers still use drills with their students? Or is it as old-fashioned as

huge shoulder pads and flare pants?

Why did drills become fashionable once?

The behaviorist scientific theory, which was the basis of the audiolingual methods, explained learning in terms of imitation, practice, reinforcement and feedback on success, and habit formation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 103).

I think it is possible to establish that it is a fact that the more we repeat a certain pattern the more likely we are to perform properly and satisfactorily. Audiolingual methods took that very seriously at the time and English as a foreign language lessons became mostly a collection of drills to be exhaustively executed by students. Students' "talking" time increased (in comparison with the previous grammar-translation method), as well as the feeling of learning achievement.

Drills, as a form of practice, would have certain specific characteristics:

- They are mechanical with no room for choice, personalization or contribution from the students
- They focus on structures mainly
- They are repetitive
- They are done chorally
- They are teacher-centered and very controlled
- Mistakes are not allowed or accepted
- Drills focus on accuracy
- They don't allow for students' manipulation or transfer of the new language into other contexts
- For all the above, drills used to be meaningless and disconnected from students' reality or interests

However, as negative as they might seem, I strongly believe that drills do have a role in the language learning process. By focusing on structures, drills help students understand and formalize forms and basic meanings. They also help memorization and perfecting pronunciation of certain phonological features. The language presented and practiced becomes automatic and stored in students' long-term memory.

In her book about language learning strategies, Rebecca Oxford (Oxford, 1990, p.9) points out that "certain cognitive strategies, such as analyzing, and particular memory strategies, like the keyword technique, are highly useful for understanding and recalling new

information – important functions in the process of becoming competent in using the new language". She emphasizes that memory strategies such as imagery and structured review, along with cognitive strategies, play an important part in grammatical accuracy, what proves to be essential for adequate communication in a number of contexts. She goes much beyond in her text, also exploring social strategies and sociolinguistic competences, but it is relevant to show that more structured practices were also considered then. She defines grammatical competence as "the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling and word formation", areas that are favored in more mechanical practices. For her, Memory Strategies are the ones that help students store and retrieve new information and can be divided into creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, employing action (Oxford, 1990, p.39).

Tricia Hedge reinforces the importance of controlled practice:

> "…as students produce a form in controlled activities, they provide further, extensive input for each other and more chances to notice the structure… practice of this kind obliges students to pay attention to syntax … practice can contribute to implicit grammatical knowledge by providing frequent occurrence of a particular form for students to notice".
> (Hedge, 2000, p. 167)

It is my experience that drills also work like some sort of scaffolding upon which other linguistic chunks will be added. Drills also promote familiarization with the new items and allow for safe experimentation. As drills are done firstly in chorus, students feel protected and safe, and even dare to make mistakes at this point. Students recognize an opportunity to experiment and rehearse before being exposed individually.

After a few decades of application, can we deny the great deal of successful learners audiolingual approaches (have) had?

Why did drills become tacky?

As research evolved, new notions and concepts came into the scene. A closer look at audiolingual students' performance revealed that although they could actually remember structures and chunks of language, they didn't possess resources to cope with unpredictable or

unknown language and situations of communication.

In 1990 Oxford makes it clear that more mechanical and fixed techniques were not enough. The Direct Strategies she developed include not only Memory Strategies, but also, Cognitive Strategies (practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output) and Compensation Strategies (guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing). Not only do these strategies subdivide in a number of substrategies that have obvious connections with communicative competence, but the author also presents a whole series of Indirect Strategies (metacognitive, affective and social) that go far beyond the mere notion that just by mastering the linguistic code a language user would be able to communicate and achieve goals competently in different contexts.

Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 108-109) bring more recent studies like the Cognitive Perspective developed by DeKeyser (1998), Schmidt (2001) and others, which compare language acquisition to computer capacities for storing, integrating and retrieving information. This theory approaches second language acquisition as some kind of information-process model in which "learners must pay attention at first to any aspect of language that they are trying to learn or produce" and that "there is a limit on how much information a learner can pay attention to" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.108-109). Those authors also state that "gradually, through experience and practice, information that was new becomes easier to process, and learners become able to access it quickly and even automatically". Information processing also suggests that language learning starts with "declarative knowledge", that is, what the learner explicitly knows about the language, like a grammar rule, for example, and the "procedural knowledge", that is, the ability to use and manipulate the knowledge he/she is aware of. This theory defends that, "with continued practice, the procedural knowledge can become automatized and the learner may forget having learned it first as declarative knowledge" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013,, p. 109).

At this point, it is possible to perceive aspects that were once associated to the old behaviorist drill ("pay attention to and understand the new language", "practice", "automatization") being revisited and acknowledged by more recent researchers. What seems to be new is the

idea that, according to the Transfer-appropriate Processing, "when we learn something our memories also record aspects of the context in which it was learned and even the cognitive process involved in the way we learned it" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.110). In a word, we learn "better" when the new language is in context, or is meaningful. These conditions do not exclude repetition or practice, but actually learning a language is more than just knowing about it; it requires knowing how to use it properly in many aspects. Nothing could be further from that than the first-hour substitution drills, for example.

It became more and more clear that not only behaviorism, but also the contrastive analysis hypotheses, could no longer be sufficient to explain second language acquisition.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.6) bring a framework presented by Naiman et al., who in 1975 were already rethinking language learning. They list a number of aspects to be developed (sound acquisition, grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, learning to talk, learning to write, learning to read) and for each one they propose techniques that still recall the very controlled practices from before ("repeating aloud after a teacher, a native speaker or a tape, following rules given in texts, memorizing structures and using them often, making up charts and memorizing them, memorizing dialogues"). However, the researchers also suggest more mentally-active practices such as role playing, inferring grammar rules, learning words in context, exposing oneself to different accents and registers, not being afraid to make mistakes, having pen pals, etc.

As research developed, new currents came forward. Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.105) mention how Lydia White and other linguists explored the influence of Chomsky's Universal Grammar; Bley-Vroman and Schachter suggested a more psychological perspective; Cook and others defended that there is a logical problem in second language acquisition, as learners may end up by knowing more about the language than the input they have received; Krashen with his largely respected but yet targeted Monitor Model and Input Hypothesis; and so on.

Something else that was new was the Interaction Hypothesis. In Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.114) we see that Hatch (1978), Long (1983, 1996), Pica (1994) and Gass (1997) state that "conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second

language acquisition". According to them, by negotiating meanings with each other learners have opportunities to conceive and test hypotheses and build and consolidate their learning.

Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.117) come to the same conclusion as I (and many other teachers, I believe):

> "One component of language learning that has seen a renewal of interest within the cognitive perspective is practice. … An approach to learning that is based on drill and that separates practice from meaningful language use does not usually lead to communicative competence".

Research has given practice new perspectives. DeKeyser (2007, p.1) defines practice "as specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge and skills in the second language". Practice, then, goes beyond the mere repetition of isolated patterns. In the same vein, Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.117) state that "the drills that characterized audiolingual instruction often failed to make the connection between the language pattern being drilled and the meaning(s) associated with them". More recent research has been looking into how practice can transform declarative knowledge (the one about the language) into procedural knowledge (the capacity to actually use the declarative knowledge). Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.117) go on and conclude that "from the cognitive perspective, the practice needed for language development is not mechanical, and it is not limited to the production of language". They propose that practice should be interactive, meaningful and with a focus on task-essential forms.

As a matter of fact, we learn our mother tongues, if we dare to compare it with the learning of a second language, without any sort of formal repetition or drilling. Learning happens basically through the observation of the context and the forms that are successful in achieving goals, the attempts to reproduce those forms, the confirmation of performance. Repetition does take place as contexts and their respective linguistic features recur and are recognized as such.

In his article in Practice in Second Language, Muranoi defends that

> "repetition is another factor that influences the impact of task on L2 production. Bygate (2001) investigated whether the repeated use of the same and

similar communication tasks promoted development of an L2… Bygate assumes that repetition is facilitative for L2 development because part of the work of conceptualization, formulation and articulation carried out on the first occasion is kept in the learner's memory store and can be reused on the second occasion…" (DeKeyser, 2007, p.72)

Facilitative repetition has to do with repetition of a communication task (or situation), and not only dialogues or fixed and isolated patterns.

This takes us to consider the importance of input in the language learning process. Tricia Hedge (Hedge, 2000, p.12) brings the concept of intake as "the ways in which learners process input and assimilate language to their interlanguage system". Craig, Lockhart and Tulvig (apud Hedge 2000:121) suggested that "learners are more likely to remember a word if they have worked on its meaning actively". Hedge points out Craig's statement that "active mental involvement aids retention". Could we say that there is active mental involvement in an exercise with drills? Tricia Hedge also recognizes the importance of controlled practice in language acquisition, and explains that

"Extensive exposure and opportunities for varied and intensive practice also allow learners to test out hypotheses as they become familiar with available forms and begin to work out the rules involved. At the same time, practice can also contribute to explicit knowledge about language forms and begin the process of learners gradually developing the ability to use a rule accurately and automatically on production". (Hedge, 2000, p.167)

Once again it is hard to place the practice by drills on the same line with words like "extensive", "test out", "process", "gradually", "developing", "production".

When Hedge describes the work with grammar in language teaching (Hedge,2000, p.146-149), for example, she presents these steps:
1.   Noticing
2.   Reasoning and hypothesizing
    a.   Reasoning deductively
    b.   Analyzing contrastively
    c.   Translating

    d.   Transferring
  3. Structuring and restructuring
  4. Automatizing

Even if we don't expand on such concepts, it is possible to recognize a more complex framework than the one proposed by audiolinguists.

A more modern theory (the Processing Instruction) developed by VanPatten (apud DeKeyser, 2007, p.9) defends that learners have a limited capacity to process L2 information and so it is advisable to present one thing at a time. Valuable advice for any teacher. According to that, "providing only one rule at a time can avoid overtaxing learners' processing resources and maximize the potential to pay more focused attention to the targeted form or structure needed for intake". We can say this is true, especially with more basic learners. This approach seems to reflect a more mechanical view of teaching/learning as it consists of three characteristics: a) grammatical explanation before practicing, b) explicit information about processing strategies, as learners are led to focus on certain linguistic features, c) participation in structured input activities, which could be a version of the so-called controlled practice. However, this structured input unfolds into referential activities that are focused on form, and affective activities that imply personal response to real world situations.

Ranta and Lyster (DeKeyser, 2007, p.147-148) also comment on the cognitive theory and explain that two types of processing modes are proposed: automatic and controlled. They state that "practice plays an important role in improving performance so that it becomes more rapid and stable. This occurs when components of a skill become automatized, which then liberates attentional resources for use in higher-level processing". This could be a technical way to defend that there is a moment in language learning/teaching when more mechanical practices should be considered. This condition, however, shouldn't be disconnected from more active and complex mental processes, as Ranta and Lyster clarify that

> "the development of automaticity requires repetition with consistent associations between stimuli and the learner's cognitive responses. Unlike audiolingual drills, where the words were changed in order to highlight the underlying abstract pattern, automaticity

> practice requires that the same words and meanings be associated" (DeKeyser, 2007, p.147-148).

What is undeniable is that language learning theories have developed exponentially, both vertically and horizontally. They tackle aspects that range from sociolinguistics to brain studies and have become very complex. They have opened a world of possibilities and definitely make language teaching more likely to be successful.

Discussion: the best of two worlds

If drills have proved to be insufficient, is there any room for their basic concept to be made useful in any way nowadays? I have given some thought to all the considerations already presented here and have devised a few activities that contain elements of drilling (like repetition and focus on form), but at the same time manage to involve the students by promoting choice, personal contribution, curiosity and even fun.

The suggestions that follow can be adapted to a number of other teaching points. They apply to a very specific moment of the lesson, in which students recognize the new language, confirm hypotheses and begin experimenting. So they presuppose that the necessary language has already been formally presented.

I hope they can in some way illustrate the balanced view I propose.

1. Chain work

Enabling goals: Simple present, fruit

Communicative goal: Express likes and dislikes

Start by saying: "I like grapes". Invite Student A to repeat your preference and include his/her own: "The teacher likes grapes and I like bananas". Student B is supposed to repeat the previous information and add his/her own.

After all the students have expressed their favorite fruits, ask the group what the most popular fruit is.

Variation: use a ball to call students randomly.

2. Memory chain

Enabling goals: Present Perfect Tense, places

Communicative goal: Express places already visited

One at a time, in sequence, students say a special place they have been to:

Teacher: I have been to London.

A: I have been to Maceió.

B: I have been to Rio.

Etc.

After all the students have said their sentences, organize students in pairs and ask them to try to reproduce as much information as they can remember by writing a list on a piece of paper(B has been to Rio, D has been to New York, etc.). Set a time limit of about 1 minute, depending on the number of students in class.

Pairs swap lists. All students repeat their sentences while pairs correct their colleagues' lists.

Check for the pair that got more correct guesses.

3. Crazy people

Enabling goals: Simple Present, routine verbs

Communicative goal: Express routine actions

Material: Cards with famous people and actions in the infinitive. For example:

((a singer))	Play the guitar	Drink beer
((a soccer player))	Play soccer	Sing
The president	Travel	Make speeches
The American president	Speak English	Know about economics
Superman	Fly	Catch criminals
((an actor))	Speak 5 languages	Act
My cat	(Not) have a shower	Eat birds

Table 1. Crazy people role cards

Etc.

Use items that may be interesting and funny for your students

Mix all the cards and write a sentence on the board:

"Justin Bieber sings and dances".

Ask Student A to pick up a card and transform the sentence on the

board using the item on it. Student B picks another card and transforms Student A's sentence and so on. The funnier, the better.

Variation: Separate cards in two piles: people and actions, and occasionally ask students to pick two people cards so as to practice the plural forms as well.

4. Is it true?

Enabling goals: Simple Past, verbs in general

Communicative goal: Confirm or not information about past events.

Make a statement in the past:

"Yesterday it rained a lot".

Invite students to confirm it by saying:

"That's right, yesterday it rained a lot".

Or deny it:

"Come on, yesterday it didn't rain a lot".

Go on trying to make students make a mistake or be in doubt. For example:

"You wrote three compositions last month".

"I bought two pairs of shoes last weekend".

"I won the lottery once".

"You didn't use the computer yesterday".

Etc.

At the end, ask students if they think you lie a lot or not.

Repeat the activity, but this time ask pairs or groups to produce sentences for you to confirm or not.

5. Let's cook!

Enabling goals: Countables/Uncountables, how much/many, ingredients, quantities

Communicative goal: Ask about quantities of ingredients

Material: Cards with ingredients and quantities

INGREDIENTS		COUNTABLES	UNCOUNTABLES
Butter	Potatoes	1	1 pound
Meat	Cheese	35	3 pounds

Onions	Oranges	2	1 cup
Garlic	Sugar	Half a dozen	1 teaspoon
Tomatoes	Flour	A dozen	Half a pound

Table 2. Cooking game role cards

Cut out and divide cards into three piles: ingredients, countables and uncountables.

Divide the group into two teams. Give team A the ingredient pile and team B the other two piles, which they keep face down.

Student A1 picks a card from his/her pile and asks team B a question:

"How much butter is there?"

Team B chooses the correct pile and picks a card. They answer the question using the quantity it shows.

Team A accepts or refuses the answer saying:

"Good. That's enough".

"Sorry. That's not enough".

The answer should be reasonable.

At the end teams swap piles and repeat the activity.

6. A crazy house

Enabling goals: There is/are, parts and objects of the house

Communicative goal: Describe a house

Material: Two sets of flashcards with objects and parts of the house

Divide the group into two teams.

Pick up a card from each set and show them only to team A. They produce a   sentence in chorus:

"There is a vase in our bathroom".

Team B should respond saying:

"That's lovely!" or

"Really? That's crazy".

Remember to include pictures with more than one element to promote practice with there are as well.

At the end ask the group which team has the craziest house.

7. What should I pack?

Enabling goals: Should, clothing

Communicative goal: Give advice, suggest clothes to pack

Material: One set of flashcards with places and two sets with the same clothes and accessories

Divide the group into two teams. Give each team a set of flashcards with clothes and accessories.

Choose a flashcard with a specific place and tell the group:

"Next month I am going to the Caribbean! What should I pack?"

Student A1 picks up a card from his/her team's set and gives advice:

"You should pack a pair of gloves".

Student B1 does the same:

"You should pack a hat".

Decide which advice you take and keep track of each team's score.

At the end give each team a place and ask them to produce an adequate list of items. Ask them to report to the group.

8. Where are they?

Enabling goals: Where, verb to be, prepositions of place

Communicative goal: Describe position

Divide the group into two teams.

Student A1 comes to the front and turns his back to his own team. A students change places. Team B asks Student A1:

"Where is João?"

Student A1 has three chances to guess:

"Is he beside Maria?"

Team B answers yes or no, and so on.

After all students A have had a chance to guess, it is team B's turn.

Keep a score of the number of questions needed before both teams finished their guesses and appoint the winner team.

9. Is it allowed?

Enabling goals: Modal verbs

Communicative goal: Talk about prohibitions, obligations and possibilities when traveling abroad.

Divide the group into two teams.

Give a clue for both teams to analyze and give the correct statement. For example:

T: Bring a passport

Team A discusses internally and says:

"You should bring a passport."

Team B does the same:

"You must bring a passport."

Decide which group provided a correct sentence and keep a score to see who knows more about the topic.

10. Are we ready to party?

Enabling goals: Present Perfect Tense with already and yet

Communicative goal: Talk about actions taken or not to organize a party

Material: a flashcard with a positive sign (+) and another one with a negative sign (-); cards with verbs related to organizing parties in the infinitive
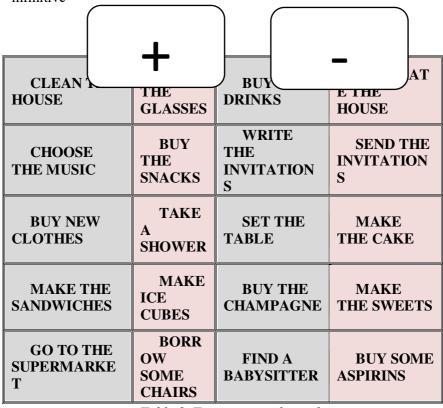
+		-	
CLEAN THE HOUSE	THE GLASSES	BUY DRINKS	E THE HOUSE
CHOOSE THE MUSIC	BUY THE SNACKS	WRITE THE INVITATIONS	SEND THE INVITATIONS
BUY NEW CLOTHES	TAKE A SHOWER	SET THE TABLE	MAKE THE CAKE
MAKE THE SANDWICHES	MAKE ICE CUBES	BUY THE CHAMPAGNE	MAKE THE SWEETS
GO TO THE SUPERMARKET	BORROW SOME CHAIRS	FIND A BABYSITTER	BUY SOME ASPIRINS

Table 3. Tense game role cards

Divide the group into two teams.

Make a pile with copies of both positive and negative signs and another one with the actions all facing down.

Student A1 picks up a sign and an action and Student B1 does the same.

Both make their sentences according to their cards and have their groups repeat them.

Student A1: I haven't written the invitations yet

Student B1: But I have already made the ice cubes

It goes on until all students in each team have produced a sentence.

11.   Success or a complete disaster?

Enabling goals: Past Perfect Tense

Communicative goal: Talk about events at a party

Material: a flashcard with a positive sign (+) and another one with a negative sign (-); cards with verbs related to any possible events related to parties in the infinitive
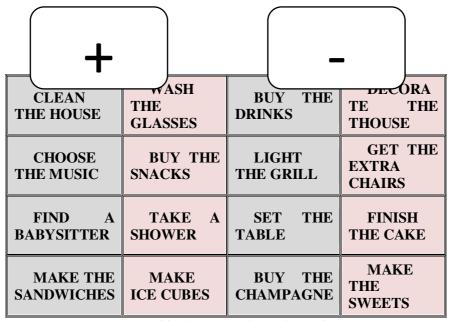
| + | - |

CLEAN THE HOUSE	WASH THE GLASSES	BUY THE DRINKS	DECORATE THE THOUSE
CHOOSE THE MUSIC	BUY THE SNACKS	LIGHT THE GRILL	GET THE EXTRA CHAIRS
FIND A BABYSITTER	TAKE A SHOWER	SET THE TABLE	FINISH THE CAKE
MAKE THE SANDWICHES	MAKE ICE CUBES	BUY THE CHAMPAGNE	MAKE THE SWEETS

Table 4. Past Perfect role cards

Divide the group into two teams.

Make a pile with the two signs and another one with the actions all facing down.

Write this sentence on the board:

When the guests arrived …

Student A1 picks up a sign and an action, shows his/her team and they all complete the sentence:

 "When the guests arrived … we hadn't taken a shower".

Student B1 does the same.

It goes on until all students in each team have picked up cards. Keep mixing the signs.

At the end ask the group to decide if the party was a success or a complete disaster.

12. Which side do you take?

Enabling goals: Present Perfect Tense with never and already

Communicative goal: Talk about possible past events

Material: cue cards with information about the teacher

study / another language   eat / caviar

be / England have / long hair

get a selfie / celebrity   wear / yellow pants

drink / tequila   have / pet

go / cruise   be / USA

Divide the group into two teams. Choose a corner in the room to be ALREADY and another to be NEVER.

Student A1 picks up a card and makes a sentence which he/she believes is correct:

A1: The teacher has never had long hair.

Individually the students from both teams have to decide if the sentence is correct or not and go to the corresponding corner. Students in each corner say aloud the sentence they believe is correct.

Confirm which sentence is correct. Keep a score of how many students from each group got the answer right. It may be necessary to identify teams using ribbons of two different colors, for example.

13. Should we stay, or should we go?

Enabling goals: Modal verb SHOULD, interrogative form

Communicative goal: Ask if different people should stay or go

Material: flashcards with a man, a woman and a group of people;

audio or video of the song "Should I stay or should I go?" by The Clash.

Show students the lyrics for the song.

Ask students to read them and elicit what the situation is.

Clarify main vocabulary.

Tell students you will play the song but they should change the chorus according to the people you indicate (by showing the flashcard – HE, SHE, THEY, or miming I, YOU, WE).

Place flashcards on different walls. Ask students to repeat procedure in pairs, by pointing or miming to their partners as you play the song again.

Conclusion

More mechanical practices don't necessarily have to be meaningless and boring. There are ways to make them relevant, communicative and even personal. The examples above make use of elements like competition, curiosity, fun and the unexpected, but also allow learners to experiment safely and positively with the language they have just been presented. Undoubtedly they are repetitive and focused mainly on form, but at the same time they provide students with a context, a situation in which meanings are clear and accessible (although improbable at times...). They encourage students to practice with a certain amount of pleasure and can give a sense of production and achievement.

The suggestions herewith are very controlled but still allow for some choice or unexpected elements, making room, in some examples, for personal contribution and opinion. They can be even communicative and fun. They may cope with the need to notice, repeat, experiment, use and automatize the new language in terms of meaning, form, syntax, pronunciation. They also (hopefully!) are memorable enough to promote memorization and readiness for the learners to locate, select, transfer and use the target language properly in the future in appropriate contexts.

Especially in more basic levels, more mechanical practices can make students more confident. At this stage, practice favors both fluency and memorization, and naturally leads to accurate and consistent production.

Drills also allow for valuable moments of concept-checking, which proves to be essential in determining the course of the lesson.

However, acknowledging the place of drills in foreign language learning is not enough when we think of the language as a means to communication. Although the general focus of drills is mainly structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, mechanical practices don't necessarily have to be unrealistic, tiring or pointless. In fact, the more meaningful they are, the more likely students are to relate to them and retain the new linguistic information. The challenge lies on how to turn repetitive, controlled and mechanical exercises into personal and involving activities.

I go back to the fashion metaphor I used in the beginning of this text and finish off with a quote by Karl Lagerfeld, a famous German clothes designer:

"Reinvent new combinations of what you already own. Improvise. Become more creative. Not because you have to, but because you want to. Evolution is the secret for the next step."

It could be easily applied to our attitude towards language teaching theories, approaches and methods.

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