

LOOKING AGAIN AT SPEAKING PRACTICE IN ENGLISH TEACHING

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Abstract

A review of the research on S/FL (second and foreign language) learning and teaching suggests that one current trend, of relevance of those of us teaching English in Indonesia in speaking classes, is a reconsidering of the role of repetition and drills in language practice. Use of communicative curricula does not call for less practice but rather different kinds of practice than previous behaviorist-based curricula. Much more time is needed for a new language habit to be formed than is often allowed for by teachers. At low levels, use of repetition is useful, indeed necessary. Drills based around language functions are relevant to a communicative curriculum. Controlled and free speaking practice of meaningful activities becoming increasingly personalized aids in the automatic production of new language items. Such practice will need to be done both in and out of class, in order for enough time and interaction in English to take place.

keywords: practice, repetition, drills, automaticity, habit

A. Introduction

This paper was born out of the frustration of teaching Speaking I and Speaking II classes in undergraduate English programs. There is a very significant time-lag between students being exposed to and practicing a language item (a speech act or a sentence structure, for example) in the classroom and its appearance in free speech or written work.

Recent research was reviewed on how much practice and what kind of practice is needed for a new activity to become a habit.

B. Brief literature review

General habit formation

Research into habit formation has been eagerly picked up by the popular health literature. It is suggested that anywhere between 21¹⁴ and 66¹⁵ days is required for a new habit to be formed, for example a new exercise routine, brushing your teeth three times a day, or a change in diet.

What about activities that are not necessarily daily habits? For example, learning a new song or piano piece. The popular literature also speaks of daily practice. A little practice often is better than occasional extensive periods of practice. Learning a new piece of music needs to be balanced with revision of familiar pieces.¹⁶

Language habit formation

How do these ideas relate to language learning and teaching? As a teacher of ESL/EFL for decades on the one hand and a learner of Indonesian language, and more recently a learner of Minangkabau language on the other hand, I am interested in both sides of this question.

Born out of behaviorism, in audio-lingual teaching methodology correct habits were inculcated through repetition and reinforcement.¹⁷ However a teacher does not have to be a behaviorist or a structuralist to include repetition in language skills classes. In fact, all theories of language learning attribute more or less importance to adequate practice of the target language.

In the communicative approach the curriculum is based around the functions for which language is used, and the exponents used to perform them.¹⁸ Grammar structures are considered secondary, and of subordinate status. Grammar is taught in relation to language usage. Communicative teaching is the basis of the current high school English curricula in Indonesia.

Four activities usually take place in teaching; the order of which depends on the beliefs about language learning that the teacher holds.

14 James Clear. <http://jamesclear.com/new-habit> (Accessed 6 April, 2015).

15 Philippa Lally, Cornelia H. M. van Jaarsveld, Henry W. W. Poets, and Jane Wardle. "How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (October 1, 2010): 998-1009.

16 <http://www.musiah.com/blog/2013/august/12-common-piano-practice-mistakes.aspx> (Accessed 13 April, 2015).

17 James F Lee and Bill VanPatten. *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen* (2nd ed.; Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 14.

18 Scott Thornbury in Harmer, Jeremy & Thornbury, Scott. "Communicative Language Teaching: The New School" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoUx036IN9Q> (accessed 11 April, 2015).

1. Language learners are exposed to a new language item - this could be a speech act, a sentence structure, pronunciation, intonation or whatever is the focus of that particular lesson.
2. Language learners analyze a language item, focusing on the cognitive processing of the language involved.
3. Language learners are involved in structured, controlled practice, which includes a certain amount of repetition.
4. Language learners are involved in significant free practice which calls upon automatic use of a new item.

It is quite possible to have students doing free practice first, followed by the discovery and analysis of the language item needed for a particular function.

The key concepts relevant to this paper, which are linked to steps three and four, are repetition, practice and drills.

C. Discussion

Repetition

Penelope Brown says 'repetition is a prerequisite for learning, providing the possibility of assimilating experience, committing it to memory, and thus also the basis for prediction'.¹⁹ Jeremy Harmer speaks about practice which involves repetition helping language items move from students' short-term to long-term memory.²⁰ Repetition can be with a whole class, part of the class or individual. Repetition does not have to be boring. Songs and jazz chants are profitable ways to do a lot of repetition of pronunciation, intonation, idioms and specific grammatical structures in a fun, interesting way.

Carolyn Graham is the name associated with jazz chants. She has developed a large number of them based around almost every exponent a teacher could want to work on.²¹ Here is an example of a jazz chant on the theme of 'warning'.²²

Watch out! Watch out!
 Watch out! Watch out!
 Watch out!
 There's a hole in the floor!
 What?
 A hole.
 Where?
 In the floor.
 A hole in the floor?
 Yes, a hole in the floor.
 A great big hole in the floor.
 Well, I don't see any hole in the floor.
 I don't see any hole.
 It's there!
 Where?
 Right there!
 Right here?
 Yes, right there.
 Are you sure?
 Sure, I'm sure.
 It's big as a house.
 Big?
 It's huge.
 Huge?
 It's huge.
 A huge hole.
 A great big hole.
 A great big hole in the floor.

19 Penelope Brown, "Repetition," in *Key Terms in Language and Culture* (ed. by Alessandro Duranti, Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 219.

20 Jeremy Harmer, *How to Teach English* (New ed., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 85.

21 Carolyn Graham, <http://jazzchants.net/home> (Accessed 4 May, 2015). See also:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_nPUuPryCs (Accessed 30 April, 2015).

22 Performed by CA Edington, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT2B11j9Bs> (Accessed 4 May, 2015).

I think you're kidding.
You're teasing me.
There's no hole in the ...

On a more theoretical level, instead of strict repetition, Larsen-Freeman suggests that what is required and actually happens in language learning is more nuanced iteration or very similar usage of set expressions. This would fit better with communicative teaching purposes²³ If we try to synthesize these ideas of repetition and iteration we could say that although exact repetition, especially of pronunciation, is not possible. However, using expressions and structures over and over again is one step towards then incorporating them meaningfully in one's own spoken communication.

Practice

Practice includes repetition but also many other activities. Jeremy Harmer sums up the need for practice:

„You are unlikely to become a proficient language user without practice, and you are unlikely to be able to conquer the fear of using a foreign language if you have not tried to use words and phrases before (even if only in your head). If fluency, for example, has a lot to do with deploying lexical chunks 'automatically' then just like the musician who practices so that in performance they can concentrate on how to 'feel' the music rather than panicking about the notes, then you have to learn the chunks, practice them'.²⁴

Popular internationally-used textbooks that use a communicative approach, such as 'Interchange', provide opportunities for practicing each chunk of language. However such textbook materials work better with classes of between 12 and 25²⁵, whereas at Padang State University there are between 30 and 35 students in first year English department classes. Class size is thus an additional complication in providing an adequate amount of practice to each student.

For practice to be meaningful an information gap is built into each activity, so that students need to use language to perform the task. This more or less reflects the real world where we use language to find out the things we need to know and in order to get things done. Different kinds of problem-solving activities, such as puzzles, playing the murder detective and logic games also provide for meaningful use of language where the motivation is the interest of solving the mystery or problem. Friederike Kleppel's 'Keep Talking' has many examples of activities like this that teachers can use or adapt.

Practice can be controlled or free. An example of controlled practice would be when students adapt a dialog provided in the textbook for a slightly different situation. Or do a class survey. An example of free practice would be when students use a similar dialog in response to a different situation without preparation. Or simulations and role plays. Free practice in particular will call on different language items at the same time. These activities also should regularly revisit previously used language items. Free practice often calls on students to personalize their use of language, as they speak about themselves. It is through extensive free practice that language habits become automatic.

Drills

Use of drills goes in and out of fashion. However many TESL/TEFL experts allow a role for drills in language practice.²⁶ Drills remain useful for low-level students.²⁷ One questions why drills are not being used regularly with junior and senior high school students in Indonesia. If English tenses and aspects, vocabulary, prepositions, conjugations and so on were drilled in high school, less of the speaking class time in university would need to be taken up with such reviewing them. Drills are an excellent example of controlled practice. To be most useful they need to be prepared ahead of time and clearly address one aspect of language that is in the process of being learned. They can progress from very simple substitutions to multiple substitutions, thus involving a mixture of repetition and cognitive processing.

Here are some examples of cue-response drills.

I like cats. *Picture of fish*
I like fish. *Picture of rabbits*
I like rabbits.

My father is sick. He has been in hospital for a week.

23 Larsen-Freeman, Diane. 'On the roles of repetition in language teaching and learning' *Applied Linguistics Review*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 195-210, October 2012. (Accessed 15 April 2015)

24 Jeremy Harmer, <https://jeremyhammer.wordpress.com/category/practice/> (accessed 11 April 2015)

25 see @agrams - Jeremy Harmer, *How to Teach English* (New ed., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 41.

26 Jeremy Harmer, <https://jeremyhammer.wordpress.com/category/drilling/> (accessed 11 April, 2015).

27 Jeffrey Harmer, *How to Teach English* (New ed., Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 49.

Word-card or teacher cues orally 'mother'

My mother is sick. She has been in hospital for a week. *'parents'*
 My parents are sick. They have been in hospital for a week.

Our car is at the garage because I ran into a truck yesterday.

Teacher cues orally 'son'

Our son is in hospital because I ran into a truck yesterday. *'his leg'*
 His leg is broken because I ran into a truck yesterday.

However in communicative language teaching, drills focussing on both language exponents at the same time as the related grammar (tenses, word order, prepositions) would be more optimal.

An example from a lesson on Making Suggestions (showing grammar focus in bold)

Have you thought of going to the doctor?	<i>Teacher cues 'Do you need'</i>
Do you need to go to the doctor?	<i>'get up early'</i>
Do you need to get up early?	<i>'Why don't you'</i>
Why don't you get up early?	<i>'go to bed later'</i>
Why don't you go to bed later?	<i>'If I were you'</i>
If I were you I would go to bed later.	<i>'Have you thought'</i>
Have you thought of going to bed later?	<i>'find a part-time job'</i>
Have you thought of finding a part-time job?	<i>'What about'</i>
What about finding a part-time job?

Two-thirds of the English department students at Padang State University are planning a career in teaching. As drills are deployed with them for their own language learning, there is the additional bonus of giving them a skill that they can profitably use when they are themselves teachers in the future.

D. Suggestions

Daily practice of each new language item seems to be one key suggested by the popular literature on general habit formation. Students in ESL classes in Australia and New Zealand, for example, are required to attend five days a week.

However, Indonesian schools and university English departments rarely have daily speaking classes²⁸ nor the amounts of time suggested by the literature to either acquire or learn language. What can be done to help students form the language habits needed to communicate in English?

Students can be encouraged to practice their spoken English daily. This can be, but does not need to be limited to homework. Drills used in class can be set for homework. In small groups each student takes a turn to be the 'teacher'. In addition they can try their hand at creating new drills.

Both controlled practice and free practice can take place inside and outside the classroom. As mentioned, 'Keep Talking' has been used by ESL/EFL teachers for many years. It is full of suitable activities that can be used in and out of class, or adapted to cover specific language functions. For a new language habit to be formed, much more of both is needed than is usually allowed for by teachers.

All four skills can be used to reinforce speaking practice. Students can be asked to find examples of conversations or readings where the language function is found. They can make recordings of practice activities. Or they can produce a written response to follow up on a speaking activity.

In class, repetition, drills and practice need to be done in such a way that all students get a turn. Breaking into groups may be needed so that all students get a chance to speak.

E. Conclusion

In low-level speaking classes, both controlled practice, including repetition and drills, and free practice are needed. Such practice should be regular, in fact daily, so therefore needs to be done by students in groups outside of class in addition to what is done in class.

As teachers we often talk about:

Practice makes perfect.

²⁸ UNP English department students are in integrated language classes four days a week in first semester and have speaking classes twice a week in second semester.

What isn't used is lost.

In Indonesian we speak about:
Alah bisa karena biasa.

And, as the pepatah minang say:
Apo kaji dek acok diulang
apo jalan dek acok ditampuah

Samaja-majaniyo ladiang
Jikok diasuh niyo kan tajam juu

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