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THE ROLE OF EXERCISES IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED LANGUAGE LEARNIG

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a consensus that learning a foreign language involves a great deal of practice with the language, the way this practice should be conducted in the classroom has been highly controversial. From the point of view of mainstream educational theory, there is a belief that students should learn the language by using it as we do in real-life situations; language-building exercises are seen as meaningless mechanical activities and should be avoided. On the other hand, from the point of view of classroom practice, all materials produced for language teaching are based on the notion that students should go through a lot of exercises to acquire competence in the language. The paper attempts to analyze the reasons behind these opposing views by describing the historical and cultural contexts in which these views are situated. It is argued that preference for either language-building exercises or authentic use of the language is dependent on the conditions available for the teacher. A difference is made between theoreticians and practitioners. Theoreticians work with hypotheses and if something goes wrong they just revise their hypotheses. Practitioners work with people and if something goes wrong they lose their jobs.

KEYWORDS: Instructional design, foreign language teaching, computer-mediated learning

Context

The motivation for this paper is my personal involvement with materials production for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language both in face-to-face situations and distance learning. In preparing activities for my own students, other teachers' students, or in helping teachers themselves to prepare their own materials, I felt the need to include drills. This happened mainly when some specific point had to be highlighted for the student, not only proactively, trying to prevent the problem from occurring, but also correctively, helping students to learn from their mistakes.

After teaching English for some years to students who speak the same native language, we develop an expertise in predicting some of their mistakes. This is not to say that all errors and mistakes are due to interference from the student's native language; the simple fact is that many of these errors occur over and over, as

probably part of students' natural development in acquiring the foreign language. I believe that knowing them, the frequency in which they occur and how seriously they obstruct communication can be useful in guiding the student to get around them. These frequent errors can occur in different strata of the language, including pronunciation, lexis, syntax, discourse and pragmatics. Although all these levels are employed simultaneously when we use language in any way in our everyday life, it may be very useful sometimes to isolate them for specific treatment.

Errors are usually associated with problems in producing the language, either in speaking or writing activities. Obviously they can also occur at the receptive end: listening or reading. Foreign language students typically encounter written and oral texts that are above their linguistic competence. One way to help them get meaning from these texts is by providing them with what can be termed as assisted performance (Cazden, 1981). As the students are still unable to understand the text alone, they are assisted with strategies that are pinpointed to their problems such as reading strategies, specific vocabulary help, use of illustrations etc.

In helping my students to overcome the mistakes they make or solve the problems they have in comprehending written and oral texts, I have used many different exercises. Many of these exercises were borrowed and adapted from different textbooks, others inspired by some theories on language acquisition, and a few, I believe, constructed from my own experience as a teacher. With the advent of computers, some of these exercises were readapted and transferred to the electronic media, using available authoring systems such as Hot Potatoes (2006). Eventually, I built my own system (ELO, 2006), and have been teaching courses for teachers on materials production. Interest on these courses has increased and what was originally a personal project ended up in the creation of a research group, with more courses being offered not only by myself but also by other members of the group. In a way, it may be described as a success story.

One aspect, however, has always bothered me: the authoring system I have developed, like the vast majority of authoring systems I know of, relies heavily on the use of drills and exercises, which student should go through for the purpose of acquiring some specific language skills. The production of these exercises, while apparently meeting a need in classroom practice, has always left margin for criticism in some theoretical areas. The exercises are seen not only as useless but downright detrimental to language learning. This is the point I want to address in this paper. I

will argue that what is detrimental to language learning is the division between theory and practice. I intend to show that the differences are not insurmountable and hope to show some points of contact.

Theory

In foreign language teaching, considering the use of classroom exercises, the distance between practice and theory is extremely variable; sometimes they are close together, as it happened, for example, during the Audio-Lingual Method, when Structuralism in Linguistics, Behaviorism in Psychology and drill practice in the classroom complemented each other in perfect harmony; sometimes they are in opposite worlds, as it happened, for example, in the generative grammar period with its emphasis on natural language: students would acquire the language by being exposed to input not by doing exercises. It seems that theories come and go while the practice of exercises remains the same. Figure 1 is an attempt to illustrate the difference between the two movements, with the theory line moving like a spiral, getting closer to and farther from the practice line, which moves down like a straight line.

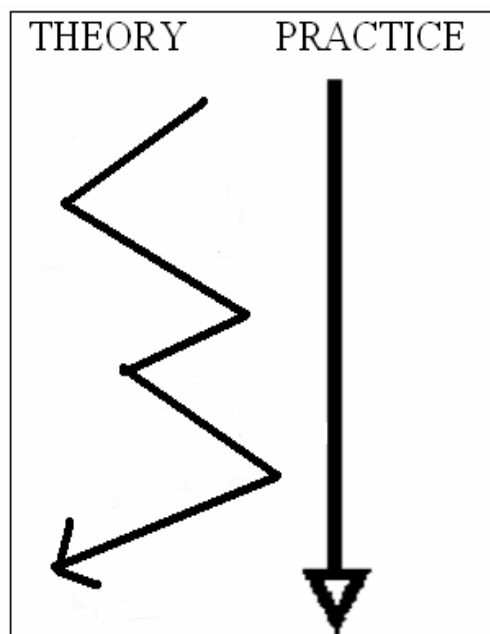


Figure 1 – Difference between theory, as a spiral movement, and practice, as a straight line.

With the decline of the Audio-Lingual Method, all succeeding theories, from the Communicative Method to other related theories, such as cognitivism, in Psychology, and social-cultural approaches, in Education, have more or less deplored the use of drills and exercises. For Lightbown (1983), drilling the students on the production of certain structures was not only ineffective but even prevented them from learning the very same structures they practiced. Drills are boring mechanical exercises that have nothing to do with real language use. Because they are repetitive, they tire students and make them lose interest in studying the language. “Drill and kill” has been the common slogan in language teaching circles. They are condemned for both their theoretical weaknesses and poor practical results.

Its theoretical base was found to be weak. But also in practical terms its hopes had not been fulfilled. Empirical research did not conclusively establish its superiority, and teachers using audiolingual materials . . . complained about the lack of effectiveness of the techniques in the long run and the boredom they engendered among the students. (Stern, 1991, p. 465)

The strongest attack against the use of drills that I know of comes from Wong & VanPatten (2003). They argue against all kinds of drills, be they mechanical, meaningful, or communicative drills, according to Paulston’s (1976) classification; be they decontextualized or contextualized drills, according to Omaggio Hadley’s (2001) classification. According to Wong & VanPatten (2003) drills do not work because learners always acquire a foreign or second language in exactly the same order, no matter which native language they speak, where they come from, or what amount of drills they are submitted to. Using Chomsky’s idea that in language we learn more than we are exposed to, the famous Plato’s problem, they claim, summarizing their own research that “Learners also demonstrated evidence of knowing more than what they were taught and more than what they could have been exposed to” (Wong & VanPatten, 2003, p. 407). In short, we do not learn a language by completing drills but by being exposed to lots of communicative or meaning-based input (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). “[T]he development of this complex and implicit linguistic system is not dependent on learner practice of language but rather is dependent on exposure to what is called *input*” (Wong & VanPatten, 2003, p. 404).

The authors' main point is that language acquisition can only occur if students are exposed to real language as used by people when communicating to each other. That means, basically, comprehension first, production later:

Drills ask learners to produce a structure or form in order to learn it. But where is the input required for internalization of that structure or form? To state this another way, the use of drills to "cause" acquisition is to put the cart (production) before the horse (input) . . . Production is not comprehension and thus produced language is not input for the learner. That input must come from others. (Wong & VanPatten, 2003, p. 409)

The two main reasons why drills should be avoided is that (1) they are not necessary and (2) they can impede acquisition (p. 417). "That they do not qualify as meaning-based input leads to the conclusion that they fall outside the scope of what is necessary for successful SLA" (p. 417). I will come back to their conclusion later.

Practice

When we move to the other end in the theory-practice continuum, what we encounter is the opposite of all of these ideas. Teachers have always used drills and exercises in their classrooms, they are still using them, and will certainly use them for some time in the near future. A survey of available textbooks shows that all of them, with no exception, present drills and exercises. Figures 2 and 3 were taken from two popular textbooks, both in the best-seller list: *English File* and *Headway*.

Both illustrations display a topic that is very familiar to teachers of English all over the world: the emphasis on the verb to be. The first one, taken from *English File*, which is some notches above *Headway* in the best-seller list, is an example of conjugation in all the six persons of the present tense (I'm, you're, it's, they're, etc. – removed from the original picture to save space).

There are two interesting questions here? (1) Why do teachers use drills? (2) Why do textbooks present drills? The possible answers to these questions are circular: (1) Teachers use drills because they are in the textbooks; (2) Textbooks present drills because teachers want them. Apparently no theoretical offensive, no matter how strong and persistent they may be, has ever been able to break this circle.

There are two points that need consideration here. One is that there are drills and drills. When people want to criticize drills they emphasize the idea that a drill is a drill, is a drill, is a drill – and choose carefully the most meaningless types; the

mechanical pattern drills from the Lado Series, published in the 1970's, is usually the choice here. Drills in language teaching are historically connected with the "Army Method," used in the 1940's to teach foreign languages to American soldiers. Language learning is seen as habit formation, and habits are automatized through repetition. The mental picture of a language teacher as a drill sergeant is very appropriate in this military context. There are, however, other meanings for drills, and some more meaningful teaching material could be chosen, instead of the Lado Series. The English language has one word for exercise and another for drill, with a more military and mechanical connotation. Using the word *drill* for classroom activities that could be described as meaningful and communicative is more disqualifying and seems to be the term preferred by some critics, instead of *exercise*. Some languages such as Portuguese, for example, has only one word for both drill and exercise.

b Complete the sentences. Use a contraction.



1 I'm 4.



2 _____ tourists.



3 _____ in room 4.



4 _____ Wednesday.

Figure 2 – New English File: Elementary Workbook, p. 4 (detail)

The other point is that textbooks are not restricted to a collection of drills and exercises. They typically present other activities as well, of which drills are just a part, although a substantial one in some cases. Drill variability and the use of drills as integrated with other activities are usually not taken into account, however, when drills are criticized.



Figure 3 – American Headway 1A: Workbook, p. 1 (detail)

Drill versus input

Let's return now to what I think is the most serious point against the use of drills, as advanced by their critics: the idea that drill is not input. People familiar with Krashen's tradition of language acquisition through exposition to comprehensible input will know what I am talking about: we learn a language ("acquire" it in Krashen's terms) only by being exposed to natural language; instruction, including drills and teacher's explanations, has a minimal role on acquisition, if any. Wong & VanPatten's (2003) paper, discussed above, takes up this same issue. Let's go back to it. I am interested now in finding out how the authors propose to solve the problem of teaching a language without using drills.

VanPatten's main argument is that we acquire a language not by producing language (speaking or writing) but by trying to comprehend it. What I find especially interesting in VanPatten is the fact that he is not restricted to theory but also offers a pedagogical implementation of his theory, through what he defines as Processing Instruction (PI). PI is a way of forcing students to process language in terms of form and structure. How does he do that? By asking students to fill in gaps in sentences. The following example is offered in the paper:

[Instruction to students] In this activity you will compare and contrast what someone gets a child to do with what someone gets a dog to do. For each item, indicate whether it refers to the small child (à l'enfant), the dog (au chien), or possibly both (à tous les deux).

Un adulte...

1. fait chercher l'os à/au _____.
2. fait faire la vaisselle à/au _____.
3. fait manger à une certaine heure à/au _____.
4. fait jouer dehors à/au _____.
5. fait se baigner à/au _____.
6. fait dormir au plancher à/au _____.
7. fait boire du lait à/au _____.

Wong & VanPatten's (2003, p. 411)

This example has to be analyzed in more detail. Providing students with lists of decontextualized sentences and asking them to complete these sentences with given words, as the authors do, is exactly what many critics would serenely describe as drill. The question then is what makes this particular drill different from all other drills criticized by the authors. My answer is that drills have form and content. Form is always the same: gap filling, cloze, question-answer, multiple choice, etc. What makes one drill different from another is content. It would be unfair and incorrect to look at the example above and disqualify it for its form alone: "Oh, it is just another gap-filling exercise." The difference is in content, and there is a big difference there; students have to think (to process, in VanPatten's terms) to do the exercise.

The following extract, taken from an exercise prepared by one of my undergraduate students in my instructional design class, involves a lot of reasoning and, in my view, should not be looked down as a simple gap-filling exercise. The gaps can only be filled in if students read forward, get the necessary information and come back to fill in the gap.

PARENTI SERPENTI

My name is Isabella. I'm 14 years old. I have two -----, and one -
-----, their names are Victor, Peter and Emma. Our -----, Jane,
and our -----, Phillip, met in high-school. They have been happily
married for 16 years. [. . .]

Figure 4 shows the screenshot of an activity prepared by another undergraduate student, using the ELO (2006) environment. The question displayed at the moment involves much more than what is usually expected from a simple multiple-

choice item, including cultural aspects and a good sense of humor. If the student clicks on “national hero” he or she will get the extra information that red is one of the colors of the American flag.

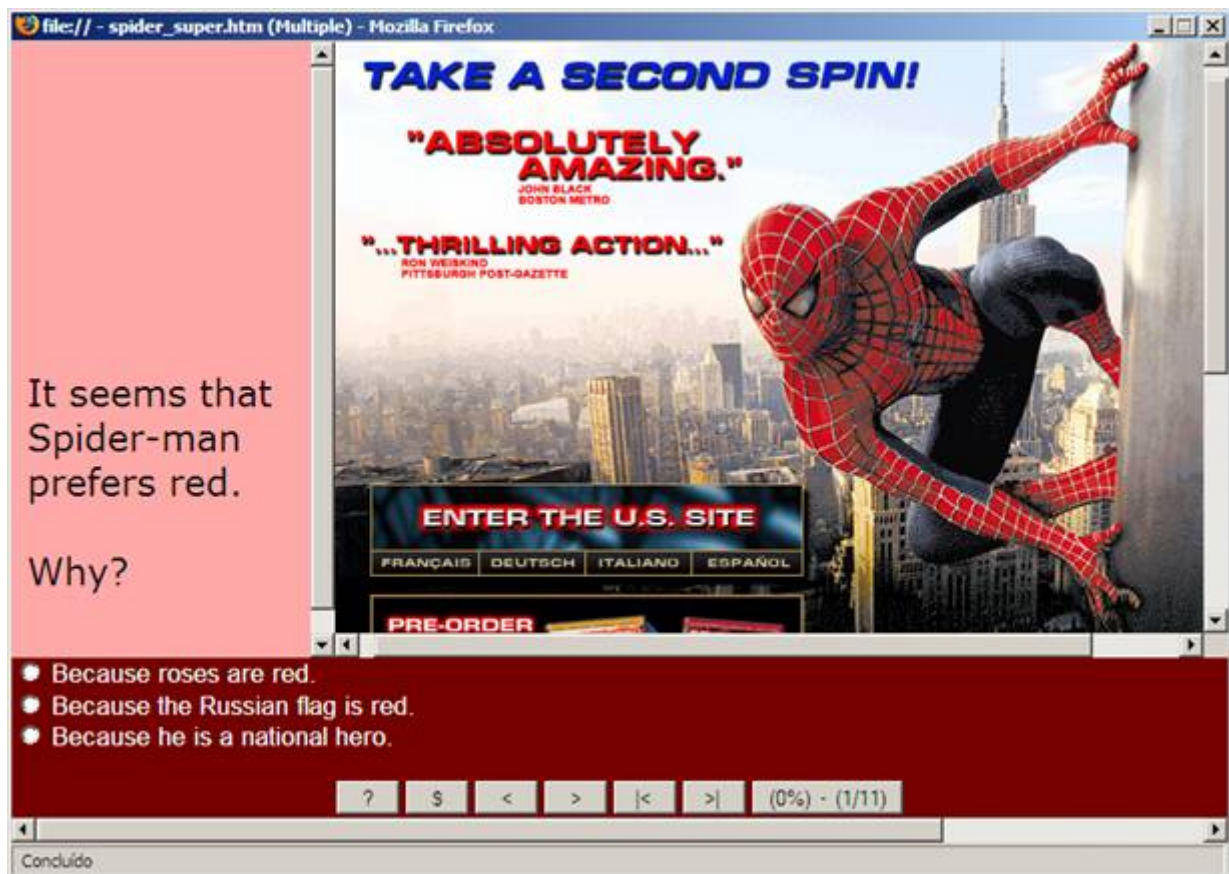


Figure 4 – Screenshot of a computer-mediated activity (ELO, 2006)

Concluding remarks

There is no such a thing as language teaching without drills. They have always been used, are still used and will probably be used for some years. Even the most caustic critics of drills have used them when translating theoretical principles into classroom reality, as we have seen in this paper. There is no reason to suppose that drills have to be mechanical, meaningless, productive-only activities, restricted to the repetition of fragmented segments of the language; they can involve internal language processing, comprehension of content and even critical thinking skills. What is needed is a redefinition of drills, especially when we consider that some languages have only one word for both drill and exercise.

Another issue is that it might be necessary to make a distinction between the roles played by theoreticians and teachers. Theoreticians are scientists working with hypotheses; if their hypotheses are not confirmed, they revise them and go on working. They are not responsible for the community at large; they are only responsible for their colleagues in the specific scientific community they belong to (Kuhn, 1962). Teachers are practitioners, working with people. Teachers are not responsible for their colleagues; they are responsible for the large community they work for, including students and their families. If scientists don't get the desired results, they revise their hypotheses and try again. If teachers don't get the desired results, they lose their jobs. It is at least safer for the teacher to do what everybody does; innovation in this context may be dangerous.

Theoreticians are very competent in terms of discourse, but sometimes very poor in terms of implementation. Teachers, on the other hand, seem to be more competent in terms of implementation, but less so in terms of discourse. It would be unfair to disqualify what teachers do because of their difficulty in theorizing.

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