

GETTING STUDENTS READY FOR REAL-WORLD COMMUNICATION

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Annotation: The aim of this article, thus, is to present ways to improve practice activities and offer strategies for transitioning to production activities. If we adequately prepare our students, they will be able to use English not just to pass an exam, but rather to really communicate!

Key words: drills, oral substitution drills, written substitution drills, right content

Our goal as teachers is to help students use English to communicate information relevant to their lives. Therefore, our objective in the classroom is to engage students in communicative activities that use authentic language. However, before students are ready to participate in realistic communicative tasks, they must master the necessary grammar and vocabulary. This mastery comes only through sufficient and appropriate practice.

I. Using drills as practice

We learn habits through repetition. Using repetition in the classroom, therefore, helps students establish English structures as habits, which greatly helps the language learning process. These habits will help students communicate without having to think about every single word. This helps build student confidence, so that they will feel more ready to produce original language in the “You Do/Production” phase.

Repetition exercises, or “drills,” sometimes have a bad reputation, because they can be very boring if students simply repeat vocabulary words after the teacher. However, if used with adequate variation, drills can be a fun and effective practice exercise for teachers and students. Following are some techniques that offer variety for the very important process of learning through repetition.

A. Oral Substitution Drills: In oral communication, drills help students’ accent. Students hear the teacher’s correct pronunciation, imitate what they hear, and later are able to substitute new language in the same structure. Students repeat not just vocabulary words, but rather useful phrases or “chunks” of language. To implement oral substitution drills, give students a common structure that will be useful in their lives and that demonstrates the lesson’s grammar. Start with the basic structure from the lesson and vary the language as the students engage in the repetition. Students will replace the language in the sentence with the language you give as a “cue.” Example:

Teacher says: In my backpack, I have a notebook. Class repeats: In my backpack, I have a notebook. Teacher says (cue): a pencil. One student says: In my backpack, I have a pencil. Teacher repeats: In my backpack, I have a pencil. Class repeats: In my backpack, I have a pencil. Etc.

The teacher gives the original phrase or sentence and the students repeat it as a group. The teacher then gives a new word (the cue). Then the teacher indicates a single student to repeat the sentence, substituting the new word for the original word. The student might correctly substitute the cue, or he/she might produce an incorrect sentence. In either case, the teacher repeats the sentence in its correct form, so that all of the class can verify if the student’s

response was correct or not. After the teacher has given the correct sentence, the whole class repeats it together. The pattern is thus:

- Teacher says the original sentence.
- Class repeats the original sentence.
- Teacher gives the cue and indicates an individual student.
- Individual student responds, using the cue.

Change the exercise frequently to keep the students interested. Subject pronouns, negative forms, and interrogative forms can also be used as cues.

Example: Teacher says: I don't have a notebook in my backpack. Class repeats: I don't have a notebook in my backpack. Teacher says (cue): a pen. One student says: I don't have a pen in my backpack. Teacher repeats: I don't have a pen in my backpack. Class repeats: I don't have a pen in my backpack. etc.

The final stage of this process is to use a variety of types of changes in one exercise. While students focus on substituting nouns or changing the verbs, they are also repeating the structures (affirmative, negative, interrogative) and mastering useful phrases. Each cue is focused on making one small change, but in reality students are practicing many different aspects of language.

Drilling with many different kinds of changes is almost as difficult as talking in real life, so mistakes are natural and expected. When students make a mistake, tell them not to worry. Students just need to focus on repeating the correct version after you.

B. Written Substitution Drill: Sometimes it is difficult for students to make changes in fast paced oral exchange drills. Therefore, you can use the same kind substitution-repetition drills as written exercises.

To use a written exchange drill, write the model for the conjugation (positive, negative, interrogative) on one side of the board. Write a sentence on the board, and then give a cue for the change you want applied to the sentence. Call an individual student to come to the board and write a new sentence, according to the cue that you gave. Then continue giving cues and calling on different individual students to apply the corresponding changes to the sentence.

Example: Teacher writes: They have brown eyes. Cue for Student 1: blue

Student 1 writes: They have blue eyes. Cue for Student 2: I

Student 2 writes: I have blue eyes.

Students should copy the written drills in their notebooks. The written drills can then be practiced orally. Quick Outline, Oral and Written Drills: Oral and written drills are one way to improve practice activities, because they are a chance to practice many aspects of language at once. Follow the structure provided above in order to implement drills in your classroom.

II. Applying contexts to practice and production activities: Many English exercises, mainly written exercises, use language out of context. Real contact, however, always occurs within a context. Therefore, practice activities are more authentic and interesting for students when they are given within a situation or story.

An exercise with context has a theme or specific content, and all language tasks within the exercise occur within the same "situation." For example, consider the content area Family Members. A practice activity without context would be a variety of unrelated, random sentences about different peoples' family members. In this case, the target vocabulary and

grammar would be practiced, but students would have difficulty connecting the new language to a realistic life situation. Compare that activity with the family tree activity, which is an activity with context. In this activity, all sentences are related in a single context of one family. Following are examples of how to implement contexts into classroom practice activities.

A. Fill-In-The-Blank Exercises with a Context: Fill-in-the-blank exercises, in which students complete a space with a correct verb or pronoun, are a very common “We Do/Practice” step for any content. Yet, these exercises are often a random collection of sentences that are wholly unrelated in their topics. When using a fill-in-the-blank exercise, maintain a reliable theme or story in all the sentences in order to give the exercise a context and to keep student interest. Compare the two sets of exercises below:

Set A. Present Progressive Exercises

1. I ____ medicine. (study) I am studying medicine. 2. Joe ____ a sandwich. (eat) Joe is eating a sandwich. 3. We ____ to school. (walk) We are walking to school. 4. Donna and Matthew ____ TV. (watch) Donna and Matthew are watching TV.

Set B. Present Progressive Exercises: The Soccer Competition

1. I ____ for a soccer competition. (prepare) I am preparing for a soccer competition.
2. My brother ____ with me. (practice) My brother is practicing with me.
3. We ____ to improve our skills. (try) We are trying to improve our skills.
4. My team ____ tickets to the game. (sell) My team is selling tickets to the game.

Exercise Set B is more interesting to students, because it provides a context for the language and allows students to picture a “story” for the sentences. It is also a more realistic use of language, because real communication is always part of a place or context. When writing fill-in-the-blank exercises, try to imagine a situation for the target language, and maintain the consistent theme throughout all of the sentences.

B. Scenarios: Scenarios are another type of exercise that practice language structures within a context. A scenario is a short paragraph explaining a situation, followed by questions. It is a useful practice activity, as it shows students how target language structures are applied to real situations. Scenarios can be used to practice any lexis or grammar structures.

Choosing the Right Content: Sometimes there isn’t enough time to get all the students to master all of the material suggested for each lesson. It can be a long, slow process going from simple repetition to being able to use new constructions and vocabulary to genuinely communicate. Think about the lesson and how students will use it in their lives. For example, take Classroom Actions. In Giving Directions it may be important for students to understand oral directions or to be able to give directions. But it is unlikely that they will need to read or write such directions as often. So you can focus on speaking and listening, instead of reading and writing. An important thing to remember: Test students on what you teach them. If there isn’t time to teach both writing and speaking for a topic, make sure your evaluation reflects what the students practiced.

For example: If you teach Classroom Actions through listening, you shouldn’t give a test that requires the students to write out the classroom action commands. This is not authentic to how they will use English in the real world or classroom, and does not reflect what you taught. On the other hand, if you teach Folklore through reading exercises, a reading comprehension quiz on the stories you studied would be appropriate.

In summary, to teach students for real communication, you should pay attention for choosing right content, suitable grammar themes and exercises.

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