Communication Practice vs. Pattern Practice
or *A Live Teacher Is Absolutely Necessary*

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A language course has two components: the course content, and the presentation of that content. This article deals with the presentation component. Its main thesis is this: Since the ultimate goal of language learning is communication, classroom presentation should, from the outset, be directed toward the development of communication skills. Learning requires practice, but this practice should be communication practice, not mere pattern practice.

I will develop this theme by considering the following four topics:

1. The nature and form of communication-practice drills.
2. The psychological preparation for communication.
3. The introduction of new content in communication practice.
4. The relationship of communication practice to textbook and curriculum.

The Nature and Form of Communication-Practice Drills

In communication-practice (CP) drills, the student finds pleasure in producing a response that is not only linguistically acceptable but which also conveys information personally relevant to himself and other people. The following two examples illustrate the form such drills might take and the rational basis for their use:

Example 1

The most important aspect of a sentence is its meaning, not its form. Often a sentence that is incorrect in formal respects still conveys the desired meaning. For example, **I told him to opens the window*. However, a formally correct sentence used in the wrong situation can lead to real-life

problems. For example, *I ordered the teacher to open the window*. Therefore, when we have our students practice sentences that illustrate a new pattern, we should make sure that they pay attention to the meanings of the sentences as well as to their form. If we discover that our drills require the student to make only mechanical responses, then we should use some other techniques to lead him back into communication and away from mere pattern practice.

The most powerful tool at the teacher's disposal is his twofold ability to (1) create verbally situations that are relevant to the student's own life, and then to (2) force the student to think about the meaning and consequences of what he would say in such situations. An example will help to clarify what I mean. Let us say that the teacher wants to practice the following pattern:

I would tell	him	to	shut the door.
	her		turn on the light.
	them		bring some food.

The teacher could proceed as follows:

1. Make sure the students understand the sentences. If necessary, translate a representative sentence into the students' native language.

2. Point out the obvious facts about the structure of the sentence, such as:

a) WOULD + simple form of verb

b) The object form of the pronouns HIM, HER, THEM

c) TO + the simple form of the verb

3. Have the students repeat two or three sentences from the pattern several times, to make sure they are making no gross mistakes, such as saying "to shutting the door."

4. This is the most important step. The teacher must make his students feel that they are communicating an important idea when they use the pattern. One way to proceed is to use a question-and-answer technique such as the following:

Teacher: Karen, if you and Susan came to class at 8:00 a.m. and it was winter, so the room was still dark, what would you tell Susan?
Karen: I would tell her to turn on the light.

If Karen does not answer correctly, however, because she has not understood the instructions, the teacher should repeat them, explaining the situation again or translating the original sentence. He must insure that Karen understands what she is replying to.

If Karen answers correctly, then the teacher turns to Paul:

Teacher: And how about you, Paul? If you were with Mary and you wanted to read, what would you do?
Paul: I would tell her to turn on the light.
Teacher: (*in student's native language*) You as a boy would tell a girl to do that for you?
Teacher: (*continuing in English*) Paul, if you came alone, and if I was in the room, what would you do?

This question is of a type that really forces the student to be imaginative. If he answers mechanically, he might say this:

I would tell you to turn on the light.

At this point the teacher may pretend to react violently, accusing Paul of being impolite to a teacher. In this way he can help him to see the implication of using the word *tell* in this pattern when addressing someone in a position of authority.

If the teacher wishes to use a more oblique approach, he might say something like "Then I would throw you out of class!" This kind of statement would cause Paul and the other students to think about why the teacher said it. Thus it would help them reach the conclusion that they should not *tell* someone in a position of authority to do something.

Let us see how communication-practice drills differ from pattern-practice (PP) drills. In theory, PP does involve a transfer of attention from form to meaning; in reality the meanings of sentences grouped as they are in PP drills are not particularly relevant either to the other sentences in the drill or to the students themselves. In such drills, a student's response will draw forth a reaction from the teacher and from his fellow students only when it is grammatically incorrect. Furthermore, to produce a correct response, the student is required to consider only superficial grammatical information. And he derives little or no satisfaction from giving a response that is grammatically correct but which does not convey useful or interesting information.

In both communication-practice and pattern-practice drills, the student must be aware of the grammatical and semantic restrictions on the substituted lexical items. However, in CP the student must also pass judgment on the social acceptability of his utterance and decide whether or not it is an appropriate response to the situation. He must picture himself in a certain situation and consider those factors that influence what he would say outside the classroom. He must consider his age, sex, and social status. He must be concerned about whether he is being polite or offensive. He must think about what the repercussions of a certain response would be. If he gives an inappropriate response, the teacher will bring this to his attention, perhaps in one of the ways I have indicated above.

A further difference between the two types of drills is that while the PP drill can be administered by a machine such as a tape recorder, the CP drill cannot be so conducted, since it requires flexible and human responses. **A live teacher is absolutely necessary.** This being the case, the teacher should spend a large portion of his classroom time on this kind of exercise—in doing what he alone can do. His self-evaluation should include the following question: Could my role in teaching have been handled equally well by a machine? If the answer is Yes, the teacher can only conclude that he is wasting his talents.

Example 2

At a very early point in a language program it is advisable to bring the student's creative abilities into play. The following example suggests one way to do this:

The teacher may require each student to prepare a few questions and answers using vocabulary and grammar patterns from previous lessons. At the beginning of the course these questions will be simple and short, and the answers will be equally brief. A student can develop a simple dialogue, such as the one given below, by using a few key words and patterns.

In this example, the teacher has asked Paul to make up a question to ask in class. The cast of characters includes the teacher, Paul, David, John, Mary, and Bruce.

Paul:	Who is taller, John or Mary?
Teacher:	Who(m) are you asking?
Paul:	I'm asking David.
Teacher:	Ask him again.
Paul:	David, who is taller, John or Mary?
Teacher:	David, do you understand?
David:	Yes, I understand.
Teacher:	Then answer the question.
David:	John is taller than Mary.
Teacher:	Mary, is David correct?
Mary:	Yes, David is correct.
Teacher:	(*using the student's native language*) Would you really say what David just said?
Mary:	John is taller than Mary.
Teacher:	(*in the student's native language*) Would you really say that? Would you use your own name like that? (*Teacher translates Mary's inappropriate sentence into her native language.*) Now try again.
Mary:	David is taller than I (am).
Teacher:	Bruce, what did Mary say?
Bruce:	Mary said David is taller than she (is).

The key to this CP drill is flexibility and relevance to the classroom situation. By asking a single question of several different people, the teacher succeeds in eliciting several different responses. Also, the question pattern that Paul is supposed to practice is repeated in meaningful contexts.

When a student makes a mistake, the teacher will have to explain what the error is. There may be a simple grammatical explanation. When there isn't, the teacher may make use of a paraphrase of the sentence in the student's own language that is incorrect in the same way that the student's English sentence is incorrect. Then the student will understand intuitively why his response was wrong, and class time will not be wasted while the teacher gets involved in linguistics, semantics, and general confusion.

As a variation of the kind of drill shown above, the teacher might require students to prepare short stories to present orally in class, using vocabulary and grammar patterns from past lessons that the students feel they need extra practice in. The teacher should encourage cleverness and the imaginative use of language even at the price of failing to achieve grammatical perfection. And, as he listens to the students, he should try to detect general weaknesses in intelligibility, to which he can then draw the attention of the entire class. After the first telling of a story, it can be immediately revised, with all the students participating in the revision.

After the story has been revised, repeated by the students, and retold by the teacher, it should be discussed in English. In the early stages of instruction the discussion will be limited to simple questions about each sentence. Later on, however, the class can discuss the story in the light of each student's personal ideas: What would you do in that situation? Has such a thing ever happened to you? Could this story have been true? and so on. During the course there should be a conscious effort to transfer the responsibility for asking questions and leading discussions from the teacher to the students, so that eventually a student will take over the leadership of the class for each discussion period.

The Psychological Preparation for Communication

A language teacher should instill in his students a number of skills that are more directly related to the students' psychological attitude toward new languages than to their direct knowledge about the language they are learning. The importance of developing these skills becomes obvious when we teach by communication practice, since effective communication requires their constant use.

Criticizing one's own performance

To communicate effectively in a second language, the speaker must be skilled in evaluating and criticizing his own speech. The teacher's role includes more than simply providing a model for the student, calling attention to his mistakes, and teaching him how to correct them. A teacher should train the student to listen to himself as he speaks, to recall what he has said, and to pass judgment on his own correctness. In other words, train the student to become his own critic.

This goal is best achieved in stages. First, the student should be made to realize that his participation in what other students are saying is a form of extended listening practice. Then, in evaluating other students, he will become aware of his own potential areas of difficulty, and eventually his own errors.

Understanding unexpected utterances

Communication implies novelty. If all responses were predictable, there would be no communication. Therefore, the teacher should train the student to take the proper attitude toward the unknown, both in understanding and in producing speech.

If a student hears a sentence he does not understand, he has three options: (1) ignore it; (2) ask what it means; or

(3) try to figure out what it means. For the language learner, the third option is the most difficult, the second is easier but ultimately less productive, and the first should be avoided. The following is a technique for helping the student take the third option.

When a student says, "I don't understand that sentence," the teacher must first decide whether he can realistically expect the student to understand it. If he can, then he must assess the student's past performance in class. If the student is one who frequently gives up on sentences that show even slight deviation from previously discussed patterns, then the teacher should conclude that the student has the wrong psychological approach to the new language. In such a case, he would be doing the student a disservice if he explained the meaning of the sentence to him directly. The teacher has several options. He may repeat the sentence and say "Think about it," and then silently await the student's response. This is the "hard line" approach that is often necessary with a stubborn student who has the attitude that language learning consists of memorizing a set of sentences and then using only those sentences and no others.

The first few times the student is told to "think about it" he may rebel. However, the teacher must not give him the answer. Rather, he should pick out another student who does not completely understand either, but who the teacher knows is willing to guess. The teacher encourages this other student to guess and helps him by suggesting different directions in which he might think in order to work out the meaning of the sentence. The class should be made to realize that meeting the challenge of new sentences in class is essential to developing conversational agility outside.

Expressing concepts

Often a student has ideas that he would like to express in a second language, but he fails to do so simply because he lacks the imagination and initiative to *try*. He is afraid to deviate from the sentence he has practiced and the words he has memorized, even though he has sufficient vocabulary to do so. This situation often arises when the student's native language does not have word-for-word equivalents with the language he is learning.

When a student balks at expressing a new concept, the teacher might simply say: "You already know these words W_1 W_2 W_3, etc. Now think of a way you might put them together to express what you want to say." Then the student can struggle with the problem on his own and benefit from the teacher's evaluation of his efforts. He has been forced to take a big step in language learning—one which

he will face repeatedly. He has now opened his mind to the possibility of making intelligent guesses about how to express himself. His attitude toward language learning has changed.

As in the case of writing stories, students must learn to be innovative and imaginative in classroom conversation. The classroom, unlike the language laboratory, affords a unique opportunity for the student to learn on the spot whether his "unprogrammed" response is correct and appropriate.

Some students may have difficulty in using language creatively. Often, however, the teacher can find something in the personality of the student that he can count on to evoke new responses. If the teacher realizes, for instance, that a student has a particular tendency toward joking, he can "set him up" with a situation in which a simple joke would be a nice alternative to a routine answer. "The battle of the sexes" can often be used to set up situations in which girls and boys can each defend the supremacy of their own sex by an ironic or teasing statement or one involving a humorous presupposition.

Another communication skill the teacher should help the student develop is the ability to evade gracefully those questions that he cannot, or does not want to, answer. He should learn, for instance, how to meet a question by asking another one, and how to shift a question from himself to another person. He can also learn how to joke about a question instead of answering it. All of these techniques make it easier for a student with a limited knowledge of a language to converse in the language without the long and awkward pauses that result from being "at a loss for words."

In summary, the teacher has the opportunity to teach the student the art of getting along in conversation. This art requires much more than a knowledge of the language. It requires the proper frame of mind: an open-mindedness toward possible responses. It requires that creativity be rewarded when it is attempted, even if the attempt is a clumsy one. It is certainly an art that cannot be practiced with a tape recorder. It belongs in the classroom.

The Introduction of New Content in Communication Practice

Another important part of language teaching is the introduction of new vocabulary and grammar material. Certain ways of doing this are particularly effective because they take advantage of the teacher's feeling for "the appropriate moment" and his knowledge of the direction in which the course is headed. The principle to follow is this: Recognize that certain things have to be "mastered" in

a course, but introduce items as they are needed, in context, and defer "mastery" until the appropriate time. The following example suggests how the teacher might do this.

If the students use the new language in situations relevant to their own lives and answer questions that relate to their daily activities, they will need to know how to talk about people other than themselves. Early in the course they might be satisfied to refer to their companions by name and to use words such as *boy* and *father* in order to talk about shared activities. But it is often desirable for the students to have words to use that have not yet appeared in the textbook lessons.

Take the word *friend*, for example. One textbook I am familiar with introduces this word relatively late in the course. A teacher using that text needs to make the word *friend* available to the students long before it is formally introduced. The problem at this point is that a teacher may resist departing from the contents of a text for fear that students will feel overwhelmed by additional vocabulary. The solution I propose is to introduce the new word in a proper context as soon as it is needed. With the word *friend* the context and need are usually apparent.

The teacher should be careful to introduce the new word in such a way as not to put pressure on the students to remember it. He may write it on the blackboard so the students can find it easily when they need to use it. He might tell them they do not have to remember the word—that he is introducing it as a "convenience for the moment." The final step is to return to the word whenever it seems appropriate, but never to demand that the students produce it from memory.

If the teacher has been careful to introduce a word that he knows will eventually appear in the text, he has insured that there will be a reward for the students when they reach it. It will be so familiar, and the students will feel so comfortable with it, that remembering the word will be no problem. The teacher can introduce new grammar patterns in the same way.

The teacher should see to it that new material is tied into old material whenever possible. In vocabulary he can do this by pointing out that a word means the same thing as, or the opposite of, an old word. In grammar teaching it is particularly important to present a new pattern in contrast to old patterns. For example, let us see how we could approach the English question pattern WHO + VERB + OBJECT (*Who kicked the table?*). We should introduce it with a lexicon that makes it easy for the students to figure out the grammatical relationships within the pattern. The sentence *Who kicked the table?* follows this rule in that people can kick tables but tables cannot kick people.

Once the question of grammatical relationships has been established, the teacher can dispense with the restriction on vocabulary and use as object a word that could also stand as subject of the verb: for example, *Who hit Bill?* Since Bill is capable of hitting and of being hit, without an understanding of the grammatical relationships a student might not be sure whether *Bill* is the object or the subject of the verb.

When it is evident that the students thoroughly understand the new pattern, they should be asked to recall a sentence like *Who(m) did Mary hit?* The two patterns *Who . . . . -ed . . . . ?* and *Whom did . . . . ?* can then be practiced by having Mary actually hit Bill, and then asking questions about the action. In this way the two question patterns can be used contrastively with relevance to a single situation.

It is a mistake, however, to introduce a new pattern by contrasting it with an old one with which it might be confused. If you do introduce a pattern this way, your students may worry more about the potential confusion than about the meaning of the new pattern. The need to compare and integrate new patterns with what has come before can be satisfied *after* the new pattern has acquired some real significance for the students on its own. Practice in contrast should follow practice in isolation.

The same principle holds true for introducing vocabulary. Many students will tend to confuse opposites (antonyms) if they are introduced at the same time. To aid these students in remembering, the teacher should introduce and practice one member of a natural pair well before the other member is introduced.

The Relationship of Communication Practice to Textbook and Curriculum

Textbook considerations

A textbook can be evaluated from two points of view: usefulness to the student and usefulness to the teacher.

The student appreciates a textbook that provides him with a clear guide for home study. In this respect many PP texts are satisfactory, for they provide a second—that is, a visual—means of evaluating the correctness of the student's responses to taped drills.

The student should also be able to use his textbook as a reference book. Therefore, it should provide an index for vocabulary items, showing, among other things, where the item is introduced. If the language is one that lends itself to a systematic display of grammatical material in the form of paradigms or declensions, the textbook should include such information. The same can be said of phonology if a special learning alphabet is required.

Finally, the text should provide some material in the form of stories or dialogues that will introduce the language in a natural way and summarize the new material in each lesson.

There are many texts that are satisfactory from the student's point of view.

For the teacher interested in CP teaching, a text with a cumulative account of the vocabulary and the grammatical patterns presented will be most useful. This information relieves the teacher of the burden of trying to remember just what has been taught before, and it makes it easy for him to integrate old material into new patterns.

To be effective for CP, a text should introduce early all the essential question patterns. The priority for the introduction of grammatical patterns should be based on their usefulness in establishing quick communication rather than on some notion of their relative linguistic difficulty. Early in the course, vocabulary relevant to the classroom scene should be introduced (*speak, understand, means, repeat,* etc.). Surface irregularities such as morphological variants should be introduced gradually, so that the burden of remembering them and using them correctly does not make communication difficult. If the teacher does not adhere to these priorities, he may well reap either or both of the following consequences:

1. Students will be able to communicate, but they will do so incorrectly.

2. Students will be able to manipulate words correctly in drills, but they will not be able to communicate effectively.

In its format a text should strike a balance between two extremes. One extreme is that of supplying too many classroom drills. This will prevent the drills from being spontaneous and relevant to the class. The other extreme is that of supplying too few drills and leaving the inexperienced teacher without enough material with which to conduct the class. Perhaps the solution lies in providing two separate texts: one for the student, which serves as a guide for home study and as a reference text; and another for the teacher, which suggests drills to help him through the initial lessons and also provides a set of sample communication-practice drills that will train him to take a more active role in teaching.

One mark of a good teacher is his attitude toward the role of the textbook and the way he uses it. He realizes that the textbook exerts a stabilizing force on the course for the students as well as for the teacher. But when he feels that the book is not taking the students in a direction that leads to effective communication, he feels free to deviate from the text. He does not feel bound to do every drill or to require memorization of every vocabulary item included in the text, since he knows that he can judge their appropriateness for his particular class better than the author could when he wrote the book.

The place of pronunciation drills

If a course is constructed so that a particular class or teacher is restricted to one aspect of language, such as grammar or pronunciation, the teacher will be unable to use the full range of techniques at his disposal for stimulating his students. If he must spend an entire class period discussing and drilling phonology, and if he conscientiously does this, he runs a tremendous risk of having the students lose interest and start reacting in a merely mechanical fashion. The skill they acquire in the pronunciation class may have little carry-over into other classes if phonology is taught as an independent sound system rather than as an integral part of a system of communication.

A student will not realize the importance of developing good pronunciation unless he sees how it "makes the language work" outside the context of a pronunciation drill. If he learns to be aware of phonological mistakes in others' speech at the same time as he is concentrating on other things, such as meaning and grammar, he will be more conscious of his own pronunciation as it affects intelligibility. If "being understood" is the main criterion for evaluating the adequacy of one's pronunciation, then pronunciation should be emphasized in the classroom whenever it interferes with understanding. The student who associates his own pronunciation habits only with the criticism of a "pronunciation teacher" or a "pronunciation class" will completely miss the reason for learning how to pronounce a foreign language adequately—that is, so that he can make himself understood in the language.

In relation to an entire language course, pronunciation should be a greater concern in the beginning of the course than it is later on. The habits acquired at the start of language study are often difficult to change. Therefore, the teacher should stress pronunciation during the early days of class. But he must also draw attention to, and teach, pronunciation at the same time that he teaches grammar or vocabulary. He will find that this is not only necessary; it also adds variety to his teaching.

Finally, students usually say that, given a choice, they would rather practice several different skills for short periods of time rather than practice a single skill for an extended period. If the teacher fails to take advantage of this fact—if he does not plan each lesson to include a modest amount of new vocabulary, grammar, and phonology—his

teaching will suffer because of this insensitivity to the psychology of the student.

The place for pattern practice

Effective communication involves the development of several skills. The preceding discussion has centered about the teacher's contribution to the development of these skills. There is, however, one skill to which the teacher has little to contribute. This is the skill of producing speech quickly and smoothly. If the student cannot do this, his audience will find it tiring to listen to him. Manipulative skills such as the rapid production of acceptable speech are developed through repetition. The pattern-practice drill is suitable for this sort of practice, since it is a way of eliciting large amounts of controlled vocalization with immediate confirmation and evaluation of correctness. Within the total language course, pattern-practice drills find their proper place in the student's practice outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Within the total language instruction program, communication practice might be only one of several techniques which the teacher could use. However, the principle of teaching students to communicate would underlie the entire program.

Some might argue that teaching communication as I have proposed would be impossible in a large class, but it can be said that it is possible to do very little language teaching at all in a large class. Others might say that the elimination of PP drills from the classroom will result in a class that is more difficult for the teacher to conduct. They will claim that PP drills are easy to construct and administer. This is true. However, ease alone is a poor reason for continuing these drills. The results of teaching a language as a medium of vital communication offset the difficulties of administering such a program.

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