Practice Doesn't Make Perfect

Hye-Yeon Lim, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center [1] [2]

W. I. Griffith, University of Texas at Austin[3]

Abstract

Practice is an essential component in learning a foreign language. However, practice alone is not sufficient. To become fluent, learners must move beyond the practice of a language to the production of the language. This paper examines the difference between the two strategies of practice and production. Examples of practice activities and production activities are elaborated. Specific ways in which production activities can be introduced into the ESL classroom are offered.

Resumen

La práctica es un componente esencial en el aprendizaje de un lenguaje extranjero. Sin embargo, la práctica, por sí misma, no es suficiente. Para desarrollar fluidez, los estudiantes, deben moverse más allí de la práctica controlada para llegar a la producción del lenguaje. Este artículo examina la diferencia entre las dos estrategias de práctica y producción. Se presentan tanto actividades de práctica como de producción. Y se ofrecen formas específicas sobre cómo se pueden introducir actividades de producción en el salón de clases de Inglés como Segundo Lenguaje.

Introduction

We are all familiar with the phrase, "Practice makes perfect." This conveys the idea that the more we practice something, whatever it may be, the better we will be able to perform a task. As a result, practice is built into virtually every activity.

This notion of practice (drill) has been especially salient in the teaching of foreign languages. In fact, traditional methods of teaching languages were based on the premise that constant repetition of phrases or patterns was essential to the learning of a language. Drills were an inherent part of every lesson. However, this particular method has led to frequent failures to develop fluency and accuracy in second language learners (Morrison and Adams 1968; Pennycook 1989). Research has shown that learners are unable to communicate their messages effectively in actual situations (Lightbown and Spada 2003). It was this failure that led, in part, to the call for more effective and communicative means of teaching foreign languages.

The communicative approaches are thought to be superior to the "drill" based strategies because they allow learners to focus on and produce more authentic language (cf. Hammond 1988). In the communicative approaches, learners are encouraged to use the language and

---

[1] hylimca@gmail.com

[2] The views, opinions, and all findings contained in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, of the Department of the Army, or of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center.

[3] wigriffith@gmail.com

to negotiate meaning in authentic task situations. This focus is on learning the language rather than on learning about the language.

Earliest versions of the communicative approaches focused on PPP or Presentation, Practice, and Production. Though PPP appears to have fallen out of favor, it is still worthy of discussion in the current context. Whatever the language that one uses to discuss the learning process, certainly learners need to have relevant information. This information is generally presented by a teacher (or alternatively, by a tape, a book, or an instructional video). This is the information that is necessary to learn to complete the task at hand. Nation (2009) refers to this as "meaning-focused input." This phase of learning involves what may be generally termed "receptive" skills.

Once the information has been presented, students generally need to drill or practice using the information. However, practice can be insufficient to create the ability to use the knowledge outside of very structured situations. For example, we have all been confronted with situations in which we have been able to correctly complete all of the exercises at the end of a chapter. Yet, when confronted with a "real-life" situation we are unable to complete a task.

It is this failure of practice to carry over into actual use in daily life that is the issue here. For this paper, practice means the repetition of the relatively structured use of phrases, exponents, or patterns selected for study. Examples of this would include fill-in-the-blank exercises, repetition of memorized dialogues, and conjugating verbs. It is not that these exercises have no place in language learning. Quite the contrary. They are an essential part of the learning process. However, stopping here is not likely to produce proficiency in the language.

Production, the third part of the PPP approach, is thought to be the final step in the creation of proficiency. However, production is an often misunderstood concept and it is often misapplied in language classrooms. It is similar to the output hypothesis (Swain 1985) and "…. constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning" (Swain 2005, p. 471).

This paper has as its goals to: (1) clearly define the differences between practice and production; (2) identify the characteristics of good production activities; and (3) provide examples of how to turn "practice" activities into "production" activities. Understanding the differences in the roles of practice and production in the learning process, being able to identify both types of activities, and being able to create good production activities will help teachers build more effective and stimulating classrooms for their students.

Characteristics of Practice

Although we are using the terms "presentation", "practice," and "production," we are not necessarily advocating a traditional PPP approach. It has been argued that the PPP approach is an outmoded view of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Some argue that CLT has been (or should be) replaced by a task based approach (cf. Ellis 2003; Fotos 1993; Johnson 2003; Nunan 1989; Skehan 2002; Willis 1996). Despite the continuing arguments regarding the value of CLT or TBI (task-based instruction), learning requires the presentation of a language piece; the practicing of that piece; and ultimately, the production of the language in extended contexts. For example, Samuda (2001) argues that TBI involves a "pre-focus" stage

followed by a "language focus stage." This would be similar to what we are calling presentation and practice.

We use "practice" to refer to the repeated use of controlled or scripted language pieces. The patterns, phrases, and forms are determined by the teacher or the text. Such language may or may not be presented in context. It may or may not represent authentic language use. Practice may be individual in nature or may be pair or small group based. However, it does not require learners to manipulate language, to depend on the communications of others for necessary information, or to synthesize, apply, or analyze that information.

Practice should do at least three things: (a) it should give students the chance to use the target structure or vocabulary without feeling as if they are in a specific testing situation; (b) it should reintegrate previously taught material; and (c) it should be safe. Learners should feel that they are investigating, discovering, and playing around with the language without having too much riding on the outcome. This means that students will not fail if they make mistakes and that there are no severe consequences for making errors in this phase of the learning process (Maurer 1997).

The goal of the practice phase is to make learners confident that they can use the language with some level of accuracy. It is at this point that learners may begin to automatize patterns. Because these patterns and forms are somewhat limited in scope, it means that learners will be able to respond with memorized phrases or with limited vocabulary and prescribed patterns. However, stopping at this junction suggests that learners are not likely to become proficient in the language due to the restricted nature of the practice activities. For this reason, one should move into more production based activities.

The use of the word "production" can cause some confusion when talking about language. It is true that whenever students write or speak they are "producing" language. That, however, is not what we refer to when talking about production. A production is a particular kind of activity that requires the student to create and use language as outlined below. Evidence suggests that production activities are crucial to the generation of conversational modification and effective acquisition of language. This means that speakers use a variety of conversational skills to make themselves understood. It also refers to the idea that meanings must be negotiated among the participants. Some research shows that the right kind of production produces more conversational modification in groups (or dyads) than in the case of teacher fronted activities (Doughty and Pica 1986; Pica and Doughty 1985a, 1985b).

Characteristics of Production

When learners have to produce actual language, they are likely to find gaps between what they know and what they need to know (Swain, 1995). Some research suggests that opportunities to learn through output (i.e., writing and speaking) are different from those provided by input (i.e., reading and listening). Output-based learning is more effective and produces greater learning (Izumi 2002). Productive learning typically results in stronger learning and knowledge than more typical receptive learning (Griffin and Harley 1996). Joe (1998) suggests that the productive use of language often involves the use of language in new ways or contexts which deepens the understanding and extends the ability to use the language across multiple contexts.

Taking all of the above into consideration, we have concluded that a production activity should meet several conditions to be the most effective. These are: (1) a problem that

requires resolution; (2) a required two-way or multi-way information exchange; (3) the manipulation of information rather than the manipulation of language; and (4) the use of the higher order thinking skills (criticizing, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing).

CONDITION 1: <u>A task which requires an identifiable solution</u>. The notion of an identifiable solution is key because both students and teachers need to know when a task has been accomplished and have some way to determine whether it is successful or not. Examples of tasks with identifiable solutions might include the creation of a tourist brochure, arranging a party, ordering a meal in a restaurant, making travel arrangements, or arranging a schedule.

CONDITION 2: <u>A required two-way or multi-way information exchange</u>. This means that information must be exchanged among all participants. Each participant possesses some piece of information but no participant possesses all of the information necessary for problem resolution. Such tasks are sometimes called information gap, decision gap, opinion gap, or jigsaw activities. In order for the group to be able to solve the problem that confronts them, all pieces of the information are necessary. This requires <u>all</u> members to participate.

These are different than optional information exchange tasks where it is not necessary for all participants to share information or that the information held by participants is not necessary for the resolution of a given problem. In such tasks, the <u>participants</u> decide whether or not to contribute to the discussion. It is likely that the most proficient or confident speakers will dominate the conversation while others will opt out of the task altogether. Just having a communicative emphasis does not mean that students will communicate. Each may have had useful information but it was not essential information. In such group work students are likely to interact less and will have less modification of speech as well (Doughty and Pica, 1986).

CONDITION 3: <u>Information manipulation rather than language manipulation</u>. This requires that the learners be focused on task completion and not on "substitution" drills where they are simply exchanging words within a single structure. In information manipulation, the central notion is that the students need to figure out how to use the information that has been communicated within the group.

CONDITION 4: <u>The use of higher order thinking skills</u>. This means that the students must do more than simply "read, recognize, and remember" (Bloom 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia 1973). These higher order thinking skills include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Tasks might include such things as deciding which activities to do for a class presentation, creating a city map with the most important tourist destinations in your city with directions and descriptions, or planning a party or event for a class. All of these require discussion, thinking, planning, evaluating, and participation.

In summary, the production phase of a lesson is where the learners get an opportunity to use language in context to solve a common task. The language needed for the task should focus on the use of the language structures being studied but will extend beyond the lesson specifics. In other words, learners will extend the use of the language to a new context and may also use additional language. This additional language may be either language that has already been learned (in which case it reinforces previous language learning) and/or it may be new language (Griffin and Harley 1996; Joe 1998; Nation 2009).

Beyond Practice: Examples

It is not always easy to create true production activities that work in classes. What follows are some examples of activities with explanations of why they meet the conditions of being a

production and if they don't, how to modify the activities so that they will. Remember that production activities require students to produce language for the purpose of resolving some issue or problem. This requires, by definition, that writing and speaking be the central focus since these are the production skills in language learning.

Let's take a common example one might find in many language textbooks. In beginner classes, a common activity is to describe people. Such descriptions often include what people look like and the kinds of things they do or like to do. At this point in learning, students often possess a limited vocabulary and have knowledge of the simple present tense.

A typical exercise might include writing a description of oneself, telling a partner about oneself, or doing an interview of other classmates. Many classes may end at this point feeling that the "production" phase has been met through the interview activity. However, if we keep in mind the characteristics outlined above, we can see that this task does not meet the criteria. Let's examine an example in more detail.

Here are the instructions for a task. "First, answer these questions about yourself. Next, interview another student. Then tell the class about yourself and the other student." Each student has a chart that appears something as follows:

Figure 1: Chart for "What do you like?"

1. What kind of movies do you like?	Comedies	Dramas	Westerns	Science Fiction	Adventure Movies
Who is your favorite movie star?					
2. What kind of books do you like?	Novels	Non-fiction	Biographies	Comic Books	Poetry
Who is your favorite author?					
3. What kind of TV programs do you like?	Comedies	Dramas	Cartoons	Game Shows	Soap Operas
What is your favorite show?					
4. What is your favorite kind of music?	Classical Music	Popular Music	Jazz	Rock	Country Music
Who is your favorite singer?					
5. What do you like to do in your free time? (Fill in the response)					
6. What are you like? (Fill in the response)					

Looking at this exercise closely we can see that it does give the students an opportunity to talk, to listen, and to write. This may seem very much like a production activity. However, it

does not move beyond the level of practice as discussed in this paper for a number of reasons.

First, we can imagine that each student will read the chart and circle or write the answers that relate to her/himself. Then, the student will probably take this chart and go to another student and simply read the questions that are on the page. The second student will probably give a one or two-word answer taken directly from her/his own chart. This allows practice of the forms but certainly not authentic use of the language.

Second, there is no particular reason for the students to perform this activity. What is the reason that they are gathering such information and sharing it with their classmates? What problem or issue is being resolved?

Third, in what ways are the students manipulating the information that they are getting? Which of the higher level thinking skills are being used? Though there is a required two-way information exchange, it is not clear exactly what will be done with this information. Accordingly, then, we might still place this activity clearly in the "practice" dimension. How might we make this a production activity?

In order to move this into the production dimension, we must find some way to have the students use authentic language that is not scripted, for a purpose that requires higher order thinking skills, and that resolves some kind of an issue. One possible answer might be the following.

Once the students have interviewed a partner, or partners, place them in small groups where they have to share this information. Now, let's suppose that we are going to find a "match" for each student (e.g., for a date, for a study partner, for a weekend outing). Have the students, in their groups, find a match for each of their students. If the class is small enough, you might have each group make matches for the entire class and then compare the matches across the groups to see if they came up with the same ones. If the class is large, then just have each group try to find matches for three to five pairs.

Why is this revised activity a production? First, students must confer with each other because no one has all of the information about the other students. Second, there is a problem that requires resolution. In this case, the groups must try to match each student with a partner who is a good fit. Third, this requires higher level thinking skills (i.e., analysis). Finally, the students must manipulate the information in order to find the correct matches. This task also requires that students create their own sentences or utterances because there are no pattern sentences written for them to read as in the case of the chart. In addition, students are likely to find this an interesting and enjoyable task and may find themselves producing and using language beyond that of the lesson focus. Similar activities could include likes and dislikes where the preliminary practice involves asking students what they like and don't like to do, to eat, etc. and then forming groups to plan a party or a class field trip or even a weekend activity.

A second example activity involves giving directions and using prepositions of place. Often students are given a map with some street names, some stores or interesting places and asked to give directions to a partner so that the partner may fill in his/her map with the missing information. Students take turns asking each other for directions. Again, although the students are communicating, this could be made into a stronger production activity with a few modifications.

Place students in groups and have them list some of the more interesting or important sites or buildings in their neighborhood or town. The students work together to create a map for tourists which includes these sites and they create directions on how to get to these places from some central location such as the airport, a tourist information stand or a hotel. Students might then include a brief description of the place. This description could be as simple as "this church is old and beautiful" (thereby activating prior knowledge and recycling vocabulary) or something more extensive depending on the language level of the students. A suggested walking tour for tourists highlighting the most interesting places could be provided. This information could be recorded on flyers or brochures. The brochures could then be placed around the room and could be judged for completeness, accuracy, and interest by the students or by the teacher.

In this task we can see all of the elements required for a good production. First, students must meet together to name the sites or places, or to provide the directions. It is possible and even likely that not all students will know of all of the places thus necessitating the use of multi-way information exchange. Second, there are probably going to be too many sites to be included on the map or for a single walking tour so students will have to decide which ones are the most interesting. In addition, there may be more than one way to get to a place and students will have to decide on the best or most efficient routes for walking. Third, higher order thinking skills are also involved since students have to analyze and criticize. Finally, they are manipulating the information (interesting sites, buildings, or stores) and creating a map with suggested sights to visit or directions to go.

These activities are certainly suitable for all levels of students from beginner to advanced. The finished product will clearly vary depending on the language level of the students. The students are engaged in an information exchange which allows them to complete an authentic task by using higher order thinking skills with non-formulaic language. By including these kinds of activities throughout the course, students will have the chance to focus on tasks and to use language in the resolution of tasks. This will produce confidence in the students by letting them use real language in real situations to solve real issues. It introduces an element of authenticity into the classroom where the focus of the communication among the students goes beyond practice with constrained patterns and vocabulary. This type of production will help the students to be able to use their language outside the classroom.

Conclusions

A common reality among language learners is that no matter how much they practice some seem unable to communicate well in real situations. We all have experienced that problematic gap between "school English" and "real English." While practice is clearly an important tool, it is an insufficient one to move toward proficiency. The proficient use of a language requires more authentic production of the language.

There are virtually an infinite number of ways to create good productions for students. However, many of the texts and many of the lessons fall short. Remember that productions require: (1) a mandatory multi-way exchange of information, (2) a problem or issue with an identifiable outcome, (3) the manipulation of the information that is generated rather than a manipulation of the language forms, and (4) the use of higher order thinking skills. These are the features that will help move students toward a greater ability to use the language effectively.

We believe that practice is an essential element of learning in any situation. However, at some point in time, practice is not enough. We have to move to more authentic situations where we will have to learn to adapt, to negotiate, to experience new issues, and to perform outside specific parameters. Language becomes the means of accomplishing the task rather than the focus of the exercise. If we, as teachers, can create such situations for our students, not only will our classes become more communicative but they should become more effective as well.

References

Bloom, B.S. (1956). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain. New York: David McKay Co., Inc.

Doughty, C. and Pica, T. (1986). Information gap tasks: Do they facilitate second language Acquisition?. TESOL Quarterly, 20 (2), 305-325.

Ellis, R. (2003). Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching. Oxford, England. Oxford University Press.

Fotos, S. (1993). Consciousness-raising and noticing through focus on form: Grammar task performance vs. formal instruction. Applied Linguistics, 14, 385-407.

Griffin, G.F. and Harley, T.A. (1996). List learning of second language vocabulary. Applied Psycholinguistics, 17, 443-460.

Hammond, R.M. (1988). Accuracy versus communicative competency: The acquisition of grammar in the second language classroom. Hispania, 7 (2), 408-417.

Izumi, S. (2002). Output, input enhancement, and the noticing hypothesis: an experimental study on ESL relativization. SSLA, 24, 541-577.

Joe, A. (1998). What effects do text-based tasks promoting generation have on incidental vocabulary acquisition?. Applied Linguistics, 19, 357-377.

Johnson, K. (2003). Designing a Language Teaching Task. London, England: Palgrave.

Krathwohl, D.R.., Bloom, B.S., and Masia, B.B. (1973). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook II: Affective Domain. New York, New York: David McKay Co., Inc.

Lightbown, P.M. and Spada, N. (2003). How Languages are Learned. (Revised Edition) Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Maurer, J.K. (1997). Presentation, practice, and production in the EFL class. Retrieved April 18, 2009 from URL: http://www.jaltpublications.org/tlt/files/97/sep/maurer.html

Morrison, H.W. and Adams, E.N. (1968). Pilot study of a CAI laboratory in German. The Modern Language Journal, 52 (5), 279-287. Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations.

Nation, I.S.P. (2009). Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking. New York, New York: Routledge.

Nunan, D. (1989). Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pennycook, A. (1989). The concept of method, interested knowledge, and the politics of language teaching. TESOL Quarterly, 23 (4), 589-618.

Pica, T. and Doughty, C. (1985a). Input and interaction in the communicative language classroom: a comparison of teacher fronted and group activities. In S. Gass and C. Madden (Eds.), Input in Second Language Acquisition (115-132). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Pica, T. and Doughty, C. (1985b). The role of group work in classroom second language acquisition. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 7(2), 233-248.

Samuda, V. (2001). Guiding relationships between form and meaning during task performance: The role of teacher. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, and M. Swain (Eds.), Research Pedagogic Tasks. London, England: Longman Press.

Skehan, P. (2002). A non-marginal role for tasks. ELT Journal, 56(3), 289-295.

Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass and C. Madden (Eds.), Input in Second Language Acquisition. (235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook and B. Seidelhofer (Eds.), Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics: Studies in Honour of H.G. Widdowson. (125-144). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis and beyond: mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning. (97-119). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). A Framework for Task-Based Learning. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman.