BETWEEN DRILL AND DISCOURSE

THE GENERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND THE PROBLEM OF LEARNING
TRANSFER

Wolfgang Butzkamm

The article describes a series of drills which apply the generative principle, i.e. the human capacity to generate an infinite number of utterances from a finite grammatical competence. Traditional pattern drills focused exclusively on the automatization of structures. They were found wanting because fluent sentence variations did not transfer easily into communicative fluency. The solution proposed here is a series of drills with a dual focus: a focus on form and a focus on content. Structures are manipulated, but at the same time ideas are played with and the semantic potential of a given structure is explored. For this to happen, mother tongue cues work best. However, as the exercise develops, the teacher can step back and let the pupils make up their own sentences so that the drill becomes monolingual. Examples are taken from English classes in German secondary schools. These drills strike a balance between a powerful communicative principle and an equally powerful generative principle, which are seen here not as opposing but as complementary forces. The article has been inspired by exercises common in previous centuries as well as by modern ideas which, so far, have yet to become a part of mainstream thinking.

Introduction

For many teachers conventional pattern drill proved ineffective because of the transfer problem: the jump from extensively practised patterns to their spontaneous use in conversation was difficult. How is it possible to transform successful practice into communicative success? Can pattern drills be improved or should they be simply thrown overboard?

Pattern practice, of course, was never meant to be communication. 'It is to communication what playing scales and arpeggios is to music', wrote Nelson Brooks (Brooks 1960, 146) in his influential book on the audiolingual approach. And it is an old time-honoured language teaching tool. It can in fact be traced back to antiquity in the form of declensions of word-combinations and sentence conjugations.

Pattern practice is based on the generative principle - a point which H. E. Palmer - and before him Prendergast and Jespersen - had clearly worked out. When a pupil hears a sentence and is made to recognise both the exchangeable as well as the structure-forming elements, he will also have learnt a whole range of further possible

sentences. A single sentence thus becomes a syntactical germ cell, a model for a host of sentences. Pattern drills, then, are a way of 'making infinite use of finite means' (W.v. Humboldt).

It is therefore not advisable simply to discard pattern drills. However, the problem of transition from practice to communication remains. There are many beginner classes who enthusiastically sing the song 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?' Sadly enough, I have hardly ever observed pupils from these classes conversing in sentences such as 'What shall we do with this book? Is it yours?' or 'What shall we do with our maths teacher? He sets us too much homework.'

But this is precisely what the learner ought to achieve: to 'free' useful forms and structures from their functional fixedness, i.e. to detach them from the context in which they were first learned, and to make them available for all possible communicative needs in a variety of situations. It is true that a structure has to be practised a great deal simply in order to achieve some fluency. But dexterity in the manipulation of sentences is not enough, because all too often students are performing sentence operations in a semantic void.

The solution: shifting the focus from form to meaning

The solution offered here is to shift the focus of the exercise away from the sentence pattern and the grammatical point to be practised to the meanings expressed by it. Thus, variations on a formal device are turned into variations on an idea. It is this change that enables learners to get a great deal of communicative mileage out of very slender resources.

Take, for instance, the line 'All I want is a room somewhere' from Eliza's song in the musical My Fair Lady. Although the teacher's idea is to practise the formal device of a 'contact clause' where the relative pronoun is left out, he elicits the following sentence variations from his class, focusing on the things wanted:

All I want is a nice cup of tea
All I want is a quiet class
All I want is well-behaved pupils
All I want is a little peace

All she wants is a new boy friend
All you want is love, but all you get is video.

...

In the minds of the pupils, these are variations on the theme of wishes and dreams, rather than a structure drill. The teacher is less concerned about how often he has to repeat the structure in order for it to become consolidated; rather, he asks himself how he can show his pupils through interesting substitution possibilities that this sentence structure is also suitable for their own needs of expression. The exchangeable sentence elements become of greatest importance.

Mother-tongue cues at the beginning of the drill

In most cases this shift works much better if we use mother-tongue cues. The mother tongue cue is meant to rapidly identify an idea or a concept, and the exercise should never be allowed to translate in the traditional sense of the word. The pattern to be practised should be taken from a familiar text, preferably a well-practised dialogue. When hearing the mother tongue cue, the students should remember the English pattern rather than trying to construct it from scratch.

An easy, straight forward drill like the following one works well at the elementary stage, if it's kept rapid and short:

Substitution:

Der Tee ist fertig / bereit	Tea is ready.
Der Kaffee ist fertig / bereit	Coffee is ready.
Das Essen ist fertig.	Dinner is ready.
Tom ist fertig.	Tom is ready.

Substitution and Extension:

Das Essen ist fertig und auf dem Tisch.	Dinner is ready and on the table
Tom ist fertig, es kann losgehen	Tom is ready, let's go.
Ich bin noch nicht fertig.	I'm not ready yet.

Transformation:

Bist du bereit?	Are you ready?
Ist Pat fertig?	Is Pat ready ?
Mutti ist noch nicht fertig.	Mum isn't ready yet.
Bist du bereit, zu gehn?	Are you ready to go?
Bist du bereit, zu schreiben?	Are you ready to write?
Bist du bereit zu lesen?	Are you ready to read?

Here is another example which – on a formal level – deals with the article a/an. The playful element directs attention away from the grammatical point and encourages the pupils to use their imagination:

I'm a/an

dog
old dog
beer bottle
empty beer bottle
egg
egg in your egg-cup
word in a line
line on a page
page in a book
book on a shelf

Although this exercise can be carried out monolingually without any problem, so that the pupils can concentrate on the difference between a/an, mother-tongue cues are preferable in so far as the exercise is turned into a jolly vocabulary practice. If it were monolingual the exercise might just as well be carried out with artificial non-existent words. Learning would here be solely limited to the difference between vowels and consonants in initial position.

Bilingual drills are not merely useful for reinforcing vocabulary; they also run along different mental tracks. With monolingual cueing the pupil solves a formal problem: a word or word group has to be substituted at the right place. With bilingual cueing the pupil solves a formulation problem: content becomes meaningful speech. This is an advantage, hardly to be overrated, as we use here the same psychological processes as when formulating our own ideas. Where the idea comes from (i.e. from the

teacher instead of from the learner) is initially of secondary importance. What is decisive is that we formulate an idea and at the same time perform a formal linguistic operation. The drill exemplifies structures during speech performance, instead of describing them, and simultaneously reveals their communicative potential. The rules are caught rather than taught. The drills proposed are grammar at work, grammar in action.

Naturally mother tongue cues do not succeed at all times. It can happen that the mother-tongue words rather than the idea expressed functions as the mental trigger. In other words a pupil begins to translate, putting his English sentence together word for word. However, the teacher can prevent this through appropriate cueing and sequencing or immediate prompts. He can thus lead the pupil to operate at the content level and de-verbalise the mother-tongue cue, as interpreters do (deverbalisation hypothesis, see Butzkamm 1993, 57). The German sentence should be taken as a global stimulus to elicit an English construction already known in toto by the student.

Objections overruled

A common objection is that conventional pattern practice is monotonous and thus causes emotional fatigue and affective distancing. This can be avoided, if the drill is kept reasonably short and rapid, as in the two examples in the previous chapter.

Another objection raised against pattern drills is that they work with isolated sentences only. Here we take up the transfer problem mentioned at the beginning. It has been claimed that drills, in which the student practises switching quickly from one utterance appropriate for one situation to another utterance appropriate for quite another situation, would be ineffective in principle. Can isolated sentences ever get close to communication? We think they can. Imagine speaking the following sentences with appropriate intonation and supporting gestures:

Was soll ich bloß mit dieser Hausarbeit anfangen?	What shall I do with this homework?
Was sollen wir bloß mit so einem Lehrer anfangen?	What shall we do with such a teacher?
Was soll ich bloß mit meiner kleinen Schwester machen?	What shall I do with my baby sister?

If both teachers and pupils make an effort of speaking the sentences 'naturally' instead of chanting them parrot-like, isolated sentences are not as isolated as they look on the page. *In our imagination*, we can immediately anchor unconnected sentences to situations. It is so easy to come up with a context that fits - as indicated in the following examples:

What shall I do with this homework? (I can't read it)
What shall I do with such a teacher? (He's so nervous)
What shall I do with my baby sister? (She's crying all the time)

In short, we would be rash to exclude such activities from the classroom merely on the grounds that they deal with unconnected sentences.

Exploring the semantic potential of sentence patterns

Here is an example from a fifth form (11-year-olds) in a German secondary (non-grammar) school (Hauptschule). The teacher (Stefan Eschbach) takes the sentence <u>I've got a good idea</u> from a previously introduced basic situation and starts with what looks like conventional pattern practice, apart from the fact that his cues are in the mother-tongue:

<u>Substitution</u>

    T: Ich hab' einen phantastischen Einfall.
    P: I've got a fantastic idea.
    T: Wir haben eine wunderbare Idee.
    P: We've got a wonderful idea.
          Etc.

<u>Substitution and Extension:</u>

    T: Die haben 'ne ganz gute Idee.
    P: They've got a good idea.

T:	Er hat immer gute Ideen.
P:	He's always got good ideas.
	etc.

Transformation:

T:	Hast du eine gute Idee?
P:	Have you got a good idea?
T:	Haben die nicht 'ne gute Idee!
P:	Haven't they got a good idea!
	etc.

The exercise continued as follows (cut excerpt):

T:	Ehm... Ich hab' 'ne grüne Idee.
P:	I've got a green idea. (Remember Chomsky?)
T:	Ich habe 'ne blaue Idee.
P:	I've got a blue idea.
T:	Ich hab' 'nen blauen Pullover.
P:	I've got a blue pullover.
	...
T:	Now, all right. Ich hab' 'ne gelbe Idee.
P:	I've got a yellow idea.
	...
T:	Yes. Ich habe einen dummen Lehrer. O.K.. Jenny.
P:	I've got a silly teacher.
T:	Have you got a silly teacher?
P:	Yes.
T:	Ehm... Would you ... ehm ... be so kind as to tell me his name?
P:	Mr. Morrison.
PP:	Hahaha
T:	You're laughing, hm?

During the first initial months Stefan's pupils had only a few adjectives available for the structure I've got a good idea. The teacher therefore makes a virtue out of necessity by presenting these comical sentences - just one of the means of shifting the

focus from the form onto the sense. The fun of the nonsense sentences deflects from the form of the sentences. A similar effect is achieved through the insertion of communicative interactions. One such piece of communication occurs at the end of the above excerpt. What was previously a mere substitution of vocabulary is suddenly transformed into a provocative question. Naturally the teacher receives an immediate answer which he was in fact expecting: he is called Mr. Morrison in his English lessons.

In the next example variations of the sentence I'm sick of... lead to several communicative insertions. Two points are of note. Firstly, again the total class atmosphere is English despite bilingual cueing. Secondly, the use of unusual vocabulary by an 11-year old secondary school class indicates that one cannot rely in advance on a fixed vocabulary range pre-selected by teacher or textbook, if the aim of communication is to be taken seriously. The teacher is free to introduce new words during the drill, and once the drill is taken over by the pupils, they themselves may ask him or her for new words. This is another point where we deviate from conventional pattern practice This is what Rivers (1968) says: 'In a structural pattern drill, variety of vocabulary will be kept to a minimum. Only very familiar words will be used, so that the student's attention is not distracted from the structural feature which he is learning to manipulate.' We beg to differ. If we want to 'save' pattern practice for a modern communicative approach, we need to introduce new words as new ideas spring to mind. Unlike Rivers, our aim is not only to automatize important structures but to explore their semantic potential at the same time.

In the following lesson excerpt the variations of the basic sentence I am sick of school lead at one stage to the sentence 'I'm sick of grammar' and therefore to a communicative interplay in which the pupils express themselves spontaneously:

T:	Ich hab' Grammatik satt.
P1:	I'm sick of grammar.
T:	That's a wonderful sentence.
P1:	Yes, of course.
P2:	I'm sick of grammar.
P3:	It's a wonderful sentence.
T:	Why?
P4:	Because grammar is ...

P5:	Not so good.
T:	I mean you say grammar is not so good... What do you mean?
P6:	Grammar is ... nuts because we can't take (?) grammar.
	Because we don't... not so clever.
P7:	What do you mean?
P6:	We are good but not clever.
P8:	<u>I'm</u> clever.
P7:	But what do you mean? We are not clever?
P6:	You are mad.
P7:	When I'm not clever then I must ...
P6:	You are mad.
P7:	I'm not mad.
T:	Well Frank. I tell you what. You are getting into deep water with what you say.

<u>'Be sick of'</u> was practised and contrasted with the German <u>'es satt haben'</u>. In our excerpt, the focal point of the exercise shifts from sentence practice to the interests and backgrounds of the learners. They exchange ideas, they learn something about each other,   they reveal something about themselves.

As the exercise continues it should become monolingual. This eventual cessation of mother-tongue use is typical: it <u>must</u> make itself redundant for a particular range of expressions when these have been thoroughly assimilated.

This shift towards 'English only' occurs when the teacher hands the exercise over to the pupils: 'Now make your own sentences according to the pattern just practised'. This final step should not be left out. The drill becomes not only monolingual but also semi-creative. If the teacher has started the drill with interesting and amusing stimuli, these will incite the students to say something interesting of their own accord. No matter how simple the pattern they are practising, the students become aware of its possibilities for communication when they attempt to use it for their own purposes and not just to perform well in a drill.

Also, if the teacher starts out to put a little bit of himself into a drill, the students who are given the chance will follow suit, and the drill is less likely to go dead on them.

P:	I'm sick of the red notebook (He means the teacher's mark book)
T:	Well, me too. <u>(he reacts to the sentence as a meaningful expression, not as a practice sentence).</u>

P:	I'm sick of Mr. Morrison.
T:	Me too.
P:	I'm sick of the teachers. All the teachers. (Independent extension of pattern).
P:	Me too. (Spontaneous reaction. The example shown by the teacher is bearing fruit).
P:	All the teachers are mad.
T:	Calm down, calm down. He's just playing around, you know. (The teacher reacts at content-oriented level)
P:	I'm sick of the class register. (After some short chatter one of the pupils continues the interchange).
T:	Why? You can't be sick of the class register. Why? What do you mean? (The teacher reacts again at content-orientated level).

In the above extract the pupils do not see their task as a formal operation, although they stick to a formal pattern. They conceptualise their sentences based on an idea and not on a form (here: be sick of). This change of focus is decisive. If they cannot continue with the drill, it is through lack of ideas, not words.

The problem of transition from form-orientated to content-orientated speaking is finally solved by introducing short communicative moments into the exercise. These communicative insertions, no matter how small and unimportant they might be at the beginning stages, are never forced on to an exercise. The teacher will have prepared possible starting points for possible communicative interactions, yet these communicative speech acts spring quite naturally out of the original sentence models.

(From a class of fifteen-year-olds, in their fourth year of English, who had been practising the 'all I want' construction mentioned earlier):

P:	All I want is a drop of whisky.
T:	Whisky is alcohol and you are not going to get it.
P:	All I want is a horse.
T:	Wouldn't that be too expensive. Do you make some money yourself? Have you got a job of some kind?
P:	I haven't got a job.
T:	So you are saving your pocket money. How much do you get?
P:	Twenty marks.
T:	Every four weeks?
P:	No, every Sunday.

P: Hör mal, wollen deine Eltern vielleicht noch ein Kind adoptieren? (Listen, perhaps your parents would like to adopt another child?)

The fact that another pupil joins in with a wisecrack in German is unmistakable: What started out as pattern practice cued by the teacher, was taken over by the pupils who made their own sentences, and finally developed into real conversation.

The teacher merely gives the initial help. After that thirty young heads also want to be a little clever, to offer something interesting, and to create surprises. Let's give them the chance. 'Of all the students whom I have taught English, those who have used the language most and have learnt it best were those who got their practice from making up sentences of their own from the very beginning.' (Allen 1972, 6)

Semi-creative drill work before free work: the missing link

Remember Harold Palmer's warning: 'Drill work before free work. This is perhaps the most important of the precepts to be observed' (1921: 74). For him, free work without the essential preparation meant faulty, uncertain and erratic work. Dynamic drills such as the ones proposed here combine preparatory medium-orientation with message-orientation. Students take over from the teacher at a point where

- they feel they can handle the structure (automatization of forms)

- they have become aware of what they can say and do with the structure (content aspect).

Because of this in-built shift from medium to message, they achieve more than a deceptive classroom fluency with little carry-over into extra-classroom contexts. The students feel confident to venture into more independent message generation. As it has been said: There is a world of difference between having to say something and having something to say.

In language learning, analogy is more important than analysis. It is therefore no wonder that despite all the criticisms levelled against pattern drills many authors continue to recommend structural exercises, as for example Göbel (1986: 143) whose 'I-don't-know' game is nothing but pattern drill in disguise:

Each member of the group can put any question to any other member of the group. The person spoken to must answer with 'I don't know' + indirect question, trying to sound as angry as possible in order to make the 'long' answer meaningful:

'What's your wife's name?' - 'I don't know what my wife's name is!'

If the group accepts this game, a great many funny answers are given; in the process the sentence structure is practised intensively (some groups are unable to stop this game - and one can no longer speak a serious word with them).

This is a structural exercise which reinforces sentence content (nonsense is a way of focusing on sense) and works with the simple trick of voicing as much anger as possible in the answers. These semi-creative drills build a crucial bridge between pattern practice and creative message delivery. Pattern practice is therefore not rejected but transformed and extended.

Creative use of language

Dynamic drills do not merely lead to scattered bits of conversations. They should also take the pupils to a point where they can transform familiar textbook units in individual, group or whole class work in order to create their own texts. The teacher who has already handed over more and more initiative to the pupils during the course of the drills, now retreats even further to create free space for self-determined learning.

We only become free in the use of language through its free use. To bring this about there must be ample opportunity in lessons for pupils to compose new texts by re-using words, phrases, lines, sentences and sentence variations from familiar texts and previous drills.

Below are coursebook texts juxtaposed with pupils' own (corrected) texts from eleven-year-old secondary (non-grammar) school pupils. Pupils exchange names, places, activities, time-settings, and in so doing change the original content. These are modest beginnings. But they point the way. And most important: the pupils found this work quite easy - but only after intervening dynamic drills had bridged the gap from drill to discourse:

Original (Peanuts Cartoon)   Pupils' texts

Lucy: You've got a 'C' in history? That's only average.

Linus: So what? I'm an average pupil in an average school. What's wrong with being average?

Lucy: You can do much better.

Linus: That's the average answer.

A: What's that? You got a 'D' in music? You can do much better!

B: The teacher isn't good.

A: But you've got an 'A' in English. That's very good.

B: I am a good pupil in a good school.

A: That's wonderful. I must better my English.

B: I can help you.

Linus: What's going on here?

Charlie B: I'm helping Snoopy to bury a bone.

Linus: Can't he do that himself?

Charlie B: He hates getting his hands dirty.

(In the classroom. The teacher has just come in)

Teacher: What's going on here?

Betty: I'm drinking a coke.

Teacher: Good grief! Can't you do that in the break?

Betty: No, I'm thirsty.

Teacher: Go outside.

After the written phase the acting out of these texts in front of the class affords many occasions for spontaneous discussions. 'When students have created a content of their own we have the prerequisites for communicative language use. Their own unique contents could be shared with others: monologues, dialogues, interviews, reports.' (Ericsson 1990, 19).

To sum up: Dynamic drills develop in various ways:

bilingual	monolingual
teacher-directed, reactive	semi-creative
unconnected sentences	communicative insertions
form-orientated	content-orientated
relaxed	stimulated, heated

Break up of exercise and transition into conversation.

Hints for the student teacher

- Define your structural objective, i.e. the elements you want to keep unchanged.

- At the beginning make certain that your students fully understand both the meaning of the pattern and its internal structure.

- Begin with easy substitutions and don't change too many elements when going from one sentence to the next. Don't trip your students up.

- Insist on fluent delivery and natural intonation.

- Watch out for possible sources of interference from the mother tongue. Don't allow your students time to 'translate', but keep a lively pace instead.

- As the exercise develops, focus more and more on content: Try to come up with some funny ideas. <u>Relate your sentences to topical events and to the personal communicative needs of your students</u>. Try all this, even if it means you must introduce new words.

- Whenever possible, break away from the drill and initiate a brief communicative exchange before you resume the drill.

- Don't forget to hand the exercise over to the students so that they can make up their own sentences.

Conclusion

The basic model of the drill sequence given in this chapter originates from Dodson (1967). Beside him, there is a variety of authors past and present who recommend bilingual structure drills, although their recommendations have not become mainstream philosophy (Politzer 1965, Carroll 1966, Fiks 1966, Valdman 1966, Butzkamm 1973, Alexander/Butzkamm 1983, Ericsson 1990).

I have drawn on all these authors and tried to combine old proven techniques with a modern communicative approach. My proposals are certainly not the only way of leading students from the formation of sentences to conversation, but to my knowledge it is the most effective and one which can be followed in small or large classes, with younger or older pupils and with or without supporting visual aids.

Bibliography

Allen, R. 'Using Drills Creatively' in: English Teaching Forum 6, 1972. S. 4 -13.

Brooks, N. Language and Language Learning. New York: 1960.

Butzkamm, W.; L. Alexander. 'Progressing from imitative to creative exercises: a presentation of the bilingual method' in: British Journal of Language Teaching 1, 1983. S. 27-33.

Butzkamm, W. Aufgeklärte Einsprachigkeit: Zur Entdogmatisierung der Methode im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer 1973.

Butzkamm, W. Psycholingustik des Fremdsprachenunterrichts: Natürliche Künstlichkeit: Von der Muttersprache zur Fremdsprache (2nd edition), Tübingen: Francke 1993.

Carroll, J.B. 'A Model for Research in Programmed Self-Instruction' in: Mathieu, G. (ed.): Advances in the Teaching of Modern Languages. Oxford: 1966. S. 11-46.

Carroll, J.B. 'The Contributions of Psychological Theory and Educational Research to the Teaching of Foreign Language Languages' in: Valdman, A. (ed.): Trends in Language Teaching. New York: 1966.. S. 93-106.

Dodson, C.J. Language teaching and the bilingual method. London: Pitman 1967.

Ericsson, E. 'Combining Functional and Formal Practice with the Assistance of the Mother Tongue' in: Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht 4, 1990 . S. 18-22.

Fiks, A.I. 'A Short Vietnamese Language Program: Training Course and Research Vehicle'. IRAL , 1966. S. 235-253.

Göbel, R. Kooperative Binnendifferenzierung im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Mainz: Werkmeister 1986.

Howatt, A.P.R. A history of English language teaching. Oxford: OUP 1984.

Palmer, H.E.; Palmer D. English Through Actions. London: Longman 1925/1958.

Palmer, H. The Principles of Language Study. London: 1921/1964.

Politzer, R.L . Teaching French. An Introduction to Applied Linguistics. Waltham. 1965a.

Politzer, R.L. Foreign Language Teaching. A Linguistic Introduction. Englewood Cliffs. 1965b.

Rivers, W.M. Teaching Foreign Language Skills. Chicago: 1968.

Valdman, A. 'Toward Self-Instruction in Foreign-Language Learning' in: Mathieu, G. (ed.): Advances in the Teaching of Modern Languages. Oxford: 1966. S. 76-107.

Words: 5,117