Verbal Play and Pattern Practice

The Comparison of a L1 Learning Strategy and a L2 Teaching Technique

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Various examples of L1 verbal play in both autistic and communicative situations are given. It is argued that (1) through verbal play the child provides himself with training phases necessary for developing and consolidating new verbal skills, and that (2) verbal play as exhibited by children from two to five is in essence semantic play. In the second part of the paper, verbal play as a self-learning strategy is related to pattern practice, a traditional technique in foreign language teaching. Examples (textbook and lesson transcript) from teaching English as a foreign language are given, together with illustrations from naturalistic L2 acquisition and early bilingualism. It is argued that pattern practice, though a non-communicative language exercise, is useful and that it can be made more effective, if the semantic aspect—allogously to L1 verbal play—receives greater emphasis.

1. Analysis of verbal play

1.1 English examples

It was Ruth Weir in her Language in the Crib who first pointed out the parallel between a certain kind of verbal play children produce and the substitution exercises or pattern drills that appear in foreign language textbooks. Here are some of the pre-sleep monologues that she recorded of her two-and-a half year old son Anthony over a period of two months:
The boy is evidently looking for the correct plural of *Rad* (wheel) and trying out possible forms. Rame points out that the boy is doing this in spite of there being no obvious need for him to find a "correct" form so as to make himself understood. It is a non-communicative situation, it is "autistic speech" as Rame terms it, i.e. speech for oneself, as is the case with the pre-sleep monologues. Rame mentions the frequency of similar verbal sequences in non-communicative situations and infers from them that the child is motivated by a "self-learning activity" - a concept which reminds one of Karl Bühler's "Funktionslust" - to constantly play and practice, try out and revise words and patterns. It seems that this activity is triggered off by the satisfying experience the child gets from arriving at a certain norm, i.e. from finding some sort of concord with the linguistic rules that is has conceived so far. Rame also mentions that the concluding negation: *ham keine räder, der flugzeuch nich* was not prompted by the pictures, because all the aeroplanes on the page were shown with their landing-wheels lowered. This I take as evidence that the boy is also playing with, or practicing a syntactic pattern. I agree with Britton (1970, p. 81) that a distinction between play and self-imposed or voluntary practice, when applied to three-year-old children, has no meaning at all. Every new or emerging skill is practiced by play-activity, because active repetition contributes to the development and consolidation of this skill. Just as every organ develops and assimilates merely through functioning, every behaviour or intellectual mechanism is reinforced through active repetition. Verbal play, then, can be described by the Piagetian term "assimilation", because in playing with words and ideas the child assimilates the world outside to his linguistic structures and incorporates (symbolically represented) reality into the structure of his mind (Piaget 1969). Viewed from another angle, this type of play or practice represents a kind of pseudo-activity, because it does not constitute a goal-orientated action upon the environment. Instead, there is an atmosphere of relief, relaxation and detachment from action which gives the child the freedom to explore the possibilities of a structure and introduce his own variations and permutations.

Another example, taken from Rame, shows the boy looking at an illustrated catalogue of a mail-order house. He identifies the illustrations with his mother:

(6) Gugema, die Mamis
   Ne Mami
   Eine Mami
   Noch eine Mami
   Meine Mami
   Kleine Mami

1.2 German examples

Let's look at some German examples. A two-and-a-half-year old boy who is looking at a picture-book produces the following sequence:

(5) Ham Räders
    Ham Räders
    Ham auch was, die Flugzeuge
    Ham Räder
    Ham Rade
    Ham Räde
    Ham keine Räder der Flugzeuch nich (Rame 1976, p. 75)

The similarity to what is commonly called "substitution tables" or "pattern drills" in foreign language teaching is evident. Britton (1970, p. 80) quotes from an earlier publication by Valentine (1942), who had made the observation that a boy of about two "was frequently heard, when settling down to sleep to be systematically 'revising' his vocabulary; repeating to himself in succession all the nouns he had learned so far". It is highly probable that this "revision" of vocabulary did not take the form a foreign language student might choose when going through a list of unrelated vocabulary items, but that the nouns practised were all bound up in a few syntactic patterns. Here is an example Britton himself provides from a girl of two years eight months:

(4) I've been sick every day in the car.
    That's why I've got a cold.
    But I don't be sick like this,
    But I don't be sick in bed,
    But I don't be sick on the beach (p. 83)

1.1.2 German examples

Let's look at some German examples. A two-and-a-half-year old boy who is looking at a picture-book produces the following sequence:

(3) Stop it
    Stop the ball
    Stop it

(2) What colour
    What colour blanket
    What colour mop
    What colour glass (p. 109)

(1) I go up there
    I go up there
    I go
    Sie go up there (p. 105)
Kleine, kleine, kleine, kleine (p. 80)

According to Ramge, there is no "objective" reason to call the illustrated persons *klein*. He suggests that it is the emotional overtones of *klein* and, probably more important, the similarity of sounds — *eine meine kleine* — that stimulate the occurrence of *klein*. Though the verbal sequence is initially triggered off by the visual data and has a clear referential meaning, the verbal chains (in the process of being uttered), seem to acquire a significance of their own and are on the way to becoming an end in themselves.

The next few examples recorded by myself go to show that verbal play also occurs in communicative situations. The child, in producing the sequences typical of verbal play and thereby also exploring language, wants to impress her father whom she is addressing and to have fun with him by creating nonsense words:

(7) Guten Tag!
    Guten Schrag!
    Guten Lab!
    Guten Frag!

    With a similar process of substitution, a neighbour's boy of about four years tries to ridicule me, exploring language as well as testing an adult's reaction. Meeting me on the doorstep, he calls out:

(8) Herr Mutzkamm!
    Herr Schutzkamm!
    Herr Mutzkamm!

Although only individual sounds are interchanged, I hesitate to call examples (7) and (8) mere phonological play. It should not be overlooked that the sound-play is embedded in a syntactic pattern and that the sequences start out with a meaningful utterance. It is my contention that from an early stage of development onwards language is invariably bound up with meaning. Though it cannot be denied that children produce meaningless words, the fun is not in the "odd" sound, but in the nonsense produced; in other words, it is semantic play. Strictly speaking the words cannot sound odd in themselves — they are made up of regular German sound-combinations — they only sound odd because they carry no meaning. The next few examples clearly show that it is the ideas or associations called to mind by the game that make for the pleasure of the activity:

The family, Father, Mother and Gisa, aged four years, four months, are eating out. Mother is first served, and Father whispers to his daughter Gisa: "Sag: Guten Appetit, Mama!"

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(9) Gisa (teasingly): Guten Appetit, Papa!
    Father: *Ich hab doch nichts* zum Essen, aber Mama!
    Gisa: Guten Appetit, Essen!
    Gisa: Guten Appetit, Gabel!
    Gisa: Guten Appetit, Löffel!

The pragmatic significance of the following example seems to me to be that the children are trying to vie with one another in producing funny sentences, in other words funny ideas. On a lower level, syntactic play is apparent in that the children stick to a pattern and only vary one particular element. The children, both about four years of age, are being fetched home from kindergarten for lunch. Sitting in the car, one child suddenly starts the sequence and the other immediately follows suit:

(10) Gisa: Ich habe Hunger auf ein Haus!
    Volkmar: Ich hab Hunger auf die Ampel!
    Gisa: *Ich hab Hunger auf den Zaun!*
    Volkmar: Ich hab Hunger auf die Ampel!
    Gisa: Ich hab Hunger auf ein' Schornsteinefege!
    Volkmar: Ich hab Hunger auf die Autobahn!

Fantasies of being strong and powerful seem to lie behind the following series of utterances, in which two girls on their way to the kindergarten vie with one another:

    Susi: Und ich zauber den Kran in die Luft.
    Gisa: Und ich zauber die Mauer in die Luft.
    Susi: Und ich zauber die Kirche in die Luft.
    Gisa: Und ich zauber das halbe Haus in die Luft.

It should be clear, though, that only a careful observation of situational and pragmatic factors can help us to determine whether a series of utterances is primarily self-contained play or is meant to be fully communicative. Though the following examples remind one of typical substitution exercises, they are nothing of the sort, but rather constitute a normal interaction for the child aged one year, eight months. The child has been told to fetch her Daddy because lunch is ready and says:

(12) Papa mhm (baby talk for "eat")
    Gisa mhm
    Mama mhm

meaning: Papa, come and eat. I am going to eat and Mama will eat, too.

She sticks to the pattern simply because at the age there is no other pattern
available to her. Similarly the next example constitutes a communicative situation, although the distinction between communication and play or practice is less clear:
Mother: Gisa muß jetzt "haha" machen (baby talk for "sleep")

(13) Gisa: Gisa haha
Papa haha
Mama haha
Ono haha
Mom haha.

Why mention her uncle and aunt (Olto, Mon) who are not present? It could very well be that though she is talking to her mother the verbal sequence, being well under way, doesn't stop because it is giving a satisfaction quite separate from its communicative value.

The non-communicative, as well as the basically semantic nature of what on the surface appear to be syntactical variations is evidenced in (14). Gisa, three and a half years old, on a walk with her parents, is observed muttering to herself.

(14) Du bist eine böse Fee
Du bist eine böse Fee
Ich bin eine böse Fee
Mama ist eine böse Fee
Mama ist eine böse Fee

One cannot help but see that the child is not conjugating a particular verbal structure but is toying with the ideas generated by a peculiar way of manipulating language. This manipulation is akin to, and sometimes identical with, the kind of verbal operation to be performed in foreign language pattern drills. Yet the child's focus is not on structure, but on meaning.

1.3 Conclusion

With a view to an application to foreign language teaching methodology, I recapitulate two major points:

1. Even at a stage where the child is able to communicate successfully and extensively with parents and peers, it seems to be necessary (or very useful) for the child to have phases of mere verbal play or training of an essentially non-communicative kind.

Dore (1975) who proposed a framework for investigating the development of speech acts in children during the one-word stage, found nine "primiti-
tive speech acts", among them the act of "practicing", in which the child utters a word or prepositional phrase without focusing on any specific object or event, without addressing an adult and without expecting any response. While this may be taken as further evidence for the usefulness of verbal play or practice, just because it is there, its absence in those cases in which language is not fully acquired indicates its necessity for a normal and healthy language development. Genie, the sad case of a modern-day (Curtiss 1977) "wild child", is a case in point. Genie, who was more or less faced with learning her first language when she was about 14, only acquired in following years the rudiments of language. What is here important is that she was only once observed to exhibit the kind of syntactic and semantic play other children indulge in so frequently. Here is an extract from this one instance recorded by Curtiss:

(15) Go park
Go school
Go trip
Go hospital
Go Grandma house
I like potty chair
Work
Go eat

(p. 185)

In such phases, the child is freed from interactional constraints, it need not orientate itself to a partner and struggle to make itself understood. Thus Weir emphasizes the relaxed atmosphere in which Anthony produced his pre-sleep monologues, and there are many similar situations for autistic speech, such as after-sleep monologues in the morning or various other play activities where the child is on his own, self-absorbed and lost in thought as it were. It is only natural that the child should also use the same device of verbal manipulation in communicative situations, where the verbal play acquires an added pragmatic or social dimension. Nevertheless, our contention that there are phases of verbal training in which language is used for its own sake is most clearly supported by the existence of easily recognizable non-communicative verbal play or practice situations.

2. Although verbal play occurs on all levels - phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic - the main interest of the child in autistic situations seems to be of a semantic nature.

Sounds and words are manipulated within a syntactic framework in order to manipulate and generate ideas, in order to see what comes out in terms of sense or nonsense. Though attempts at arriving at some satis-
flying linguistic norm can also be observed, as in (5), instances in which the child handles verbal patterns in order to see what happens to his view of the world are much more frequent.

It has been observed that every playful departure from the normal, every humorous disturbance of what seems right, every comic breach in the routine of persons and things actually strengthens the child's conception of the normal (Britton 1970; Helmers 1971).

2. On the analogy between first and foreign language learning

Looking at the natural acquisition process of a first language came for a certain time into disrepute among foreign language experts. Too often people had looked at how infants learn their mother-tongue only in order to find support for some preconceived ideas about how a foreign language should be taught. An obviously absurd argument taken from the analogy between mother-tongue acquisition and foreign language learning was at the back of the direct method or monolingual approach: just as children learn their mother-tongue through direct contact with things and events, without the intermediary of another language, a foreign language should be taught by itself, without the help of translation.

On the other hand it would be equally wrong to simply continue teaching traditions and to develop teaching methods only using the experience of what seems to work in the classroom and without trying to understand the learning processes involved. Butzkamm (1978, p.177) argued that the direct method often works not because the teacher avoided the mother-tongue explanation but despite this fact, as the student was able to supply himself with a mother-tongue meaning equivalent. Similarly, Wode (1974) and Felix (1977a) on the evidence of data from second language acquisition in a natural environment without any type of formal instruction ("natürliche Zweisprachigkeit") point out that certain teaching techniques may actually run counter to the learning techniques the student himself might adopt to acquire a given skill. These authors are working towards an integrative theory of language acquisition, i.e. one that brings within the scope of a single theory learning principles of L1 acquisition, naturalistic, untutored L2 acquisition and foreign language learning.

For the foreign language teacher it is clear that he can't accept anything that has not stood, or will not stand, the test of the foreign language classroom. But he has got to be more aware of the fact that what and how he thinks he teaches is not necessarily what and how the students learn. The idea is to coordinate teaching procedures and learning strate-egms so as to achieve the best possible effect.

3. Analysis of pattern drill

3.1 Exploiting the productivity of language structures

This brings us back to the stratagem of verbal play in L1 acquisition and the teaching technique which has come to be called pattern practice. I shall now point out some commonalities and differences between learning stratagem and teaching technique and suggest ways of exploiting the teaching technique to the full.

The characteristic feature of pattern practice is the freedom of choice or the possibility of variation within a syntactical framework of prescribed elements and recurring sames. In this paper, the formal similarity between verbal play and pattern drills has been stressed by deliberately arranging the children's utterances in the form of a foreign language substitution table. On this level, then, there is a perfect fit between what children have been observed to be doing by themselves and what they are later taught to do in a foreign language class. This also ties in with data recorded by L.W. Fillsmore (1976) of five Spanish-speaking immigrant children with no foreign language schooling, i.e. the case of naturalistic L2 acquisition. The children first acquired formulaic blocks, that is, unanalysed functional wholes like wait a minute, lemme see, stop it, that worked in certain situations. Later they discovered substitution slots, i.e. they learned how to break up a formulaic unit and use it as a sentence frame to produce many more meaningful sentences:

I wanna dese one, I wanna read it dese story, I wanna color it dese picture.

This is exactly what happens in pattern drills. A sentence or syntagma is selected from a basic dialogue, and in the ensuing drill the student discovers its fixed elements and its interchangeable parts. In other words, a string of words is recognized as a productive structure, with which new language can be generated. Thus pattern drills exploit the generative character of language, and the learner gets to know the situational range of a given structure and becomes aware of its possibilities for communication.
3.2 Usefulness of non-communicative language exercises

Pattern drill is "drill speech", not "real speech", to use Jarvis' (1968) terminology. A common distinction is that between manipulation of language and communication (which is useful, though any language exercise that involves more than one person constitutes a certain type of communication). Again, we can notice a similarity between verbal play and pattern drill. In both, the speaker's task is easier, when compared to the demands of a fully communicative situation. The child need not adapt himself to the needs of an interlocutor and in most cases he plays an easy game of free associations. Sticking to one structure for a certain time is a facilitating device; he is free to change the structure and to pass on to something quite different whenever he feels like it.

Likewise, the student performing a pattern drill is spared the trouble of finding the correct expression for his ideas. He is freed from the pressures of genuine communication in the foreign language and the difficulties of a more integrative language use.

Some authors, distressed by the fact that there is usually a "lack of real language practice" (Chastain 1971, p. 46) and too much drill, have gone too far in the other direction and recommend only "communicative" activities. Analyses of teaching lessons clearly show that students do in fact need a number of imitative and manipulative contacts with new language material before they can safely venture into what approaches "normal" communication, i.e. the type of free and spontaneous language use normally found outside the foreign language classroom. The comparison with L1 acquisition supports this view in as much as the child voluntarily provides himself with the necessary practice situations, where he is freed from the contraints of communication.

There is no sense in reverting to what has been called "the sunburn model of language teaching" or "language learning by osmosis" or the "language bath" where students are supposed to pick up the foreign language by some miraculous mechanism and to communicate freely without any drill or formal training. This view, insofar as it has been based on an analogy to L1 acquisition, ignores that (1) parents create a specially simplified linguistic environment for the child (baby talk, caretaker speech), and that (2) practice, as opposed to communication, has an important function in the child's language. The child needs "dummy runs"; so does the foreign language learner.

Evidence for this view is also to be found in observations made during various Bilingual Education Projects in Wales, one of them having the aim of enabling initially monolingual English-speaking children in anglicized areas to achieve a high standard of proficiency in Welsh by the end of their primary education. Here children have been heard playing with, or practicing voluntarily their second language outside the communicative event by imitating and substituting L2 sentences in monologue.

"The child imitates and repeats the second-language sounds chains when he is playing by himself. It seems that the actual activity with other children or adults does not allow the child a large enough number of speaking and listening contacts to consolidate the language sufficiently ... It is during this 'practising' that the second-language learner also permutes vocabulary and sentence elements as well as extends and adds together clauses ... For example, permutation work is involved when the young second-language learner, whilst playing with a series of toys, says to himself or turns to a by-stander with, That's mine — that's Daddy's — that's Mummy's, etc., and the whole activity becomes a sort of language game" (Dodson 1976, p. 7).

3.3 Emphasizing the semantic aspect

We finally come to an important difference between verbal play as we have interpreted it in this paper and pattern practice as it is generally understood. My point is that pattern practice will become a more effective teaching tool, if it is made to more closely resemble, in this and other respects, children's verbal play.

A major point of this paper has been to demonstrate that verbal play as exhibited in two-to-five-year-old children is in essence semantic. Though the child exploits and thus practices a certain syntactic structure, it is the meanings, the ideas and images conjured up by the verbal variations that really hold the child's interest. In pattern practice, however, the teacher's and textbook authors' interest has been exclusively centred on the syntactic pattern and its generative power. This one-sided emphasis on the pattern as a syntactic mechanism is probably due to the influence of American structural linguistics (inter alia Hockett, Gleason, Fries, Lado, Brooks) who did much to revive this teaching technique. (It is not an invention of structuralism — in the seventeenth century, for instance, it was known by the name of "Satzi konjugieren") To these people, the basic patterns were all-important, and had consequently to be drilled again and again until the learner could handle them automatically. Vocabulary seemed comparatively easy. Words out of context could mean practically everything or nothing. The main function of lexical substitutions and new vocabulary items in pattern drills was to avoid the monotony of repeating over and over again the same structure.
with the same words. It is only fair to say that language teachers have long since moved away from this attitude, one which—in its obsession with structure—nowadays almost appears a caricature. Many structure drills are now contextualised—they are set within a situational frame, e.g. at a factory, at the customs, at the post office etc., and many substitution drills have been converted into a series of dialogue exchanges:

Who shall I invite?  You can invite anybody you like.
When shall I come?  You can come any time you like.
What shall I wear?  You can wear anything you like.
Where shall I sit?  You can sit anywhere you like.

The sentences are connected in as much as they all refer to one particular situation, thus providing a sensible frame for the lexis to appear in during the exercise; moreover, stimulus and response appear as questions and answers, thus making the exercise more "natural" and more "communicative". While such efforts to contextualise a drill and create plausible dialogue sequences do sometimes result in ingenious improvements on dull, run-of-the-mill substitution exercises, my analysis both of how pattern drills work in the classroom and of what happens in the mind of the child who practices patterns in autistic speech leads me to a different solution. For pattern drills to be effective, they need not refer to one over-all situation, nor need they be arranged as dialogue.

What matters most is that the sentences produced carry interesting meanings. The words can therefore no longer be considered as mere or less arbitrary, negligible fillers of important structural slots. Both structural and lexical meaning combined produce the idea of the sentence-structure—it can be an important personal idea, a fascinating idea releasing a stream of fantasy, a queer, bewildering idea or plain, ordinary, insignificant, flat and colourless. While the teaching objective remains the acquisition of a grammatical structure, this can only be reached if the students actually participate in the drill. An important means of securing the students' attention and participation is to give them something interesting to say—even in a pattern drill. We should pay more attention to the lexical items introduced in the pattern drill, and thus make the student reconnoitre and explore the subject-matter areas and the situational range that can be covered by a given structure. A minor lexical change might create a total reversal of meaning and demonstrate that a given structure is not by any means restricted to its original context, but can serve in many ways and help to express quite different communicative needs. Poets and parodists have exploited this device, refashioning old views and arriving at fresh insights. "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn", sings Goethe. "Kennen du das Land, wo die Kano-

nen blühn", says Kästner two hundred years later. "To print or not to print—that is the question." There seems to be no really famous verse that has not suffered the fate of (or been honoured by) parody. A simple substitution does the trick, and suddenly another time and place are evoked, and quite another person is heard speaking about something quite different. Why not tap the huge resources of ideas hidden in language by manipulating it just as children and poets do? I would not try to suggest that we could flood our language classes with self-invented phrases of memorable content. What is possible is conscious attention to content and personal meaning that can make for variety, sustain motivation and direct the drill towards communication.

To conclude, I will illustrate the foregoing with a few examples. Gompf (1971, p. 197) reports that at primary school level, children delight in absurd situations. They show an "almost inexhaustible readiness to speak" when allowed to produce "crazy sentences" such as My dog is green or red or Tom is drinking his chair. Gompf's observations from FLES programmes can be related to examples (7) - (11). My own examples stem from ten-to-thirteen-year-old grammar school children in their first and second year of English. I get the children interested in pattern drill by deliberately choosing sentences that play upon the personal relations among the participants. In one lesson (24.3.76) I drilled the phrase it says here that which needs practice because it contrasts with the German hier steht, daß. I used a bilingual substitution exercise, some of the stimuli and responses being as follows:

(17) Schaut euch das Klassenbuch an. Hier steht, daß Monika immer laut ist.
    Look at the class register. It says here that Monika is always loud.
    Hier steht, daß Monika zu viel spricht.
    It says here that Monika talks too much.
    Hier steht, daß Chris immer meine Kreide stiehlt.
    It says here that Chris always steals my chalk.
    Hier steht, daß Philip immer über mich lacht.
    It says here that Philip always laughs at me.
    Hier steht, daß Susan immer mit ihrem Kugelschreiber knipst.
    It says here that Susan always clicks her ball-point pen.

It should be made clear that all the persons mentioned here are pupils of the same class, who have been given English names. Some of the teacher's "accusations" are deliberately wrong (Monica is the quietest girl of the class), some have a grain of truth in them. Thus a pattern drill was used to convey ideas that somehow mattered to the students. Through the pupils recognized the syntactic drill, it became a kind of semantic play for them.
I have not measured the success of this exercise objectively. But I have repeatedly noticed, both in my own non-documented lessons as well as in taped lessons, the pupil's lively participation, their willingness to go on with the exercise, and even their wish to take over from the teacher and carry on the exercise themselves, whenever it reached this level of semantic play.

I will conclude with a plain, unvarnished lesson extract, the raw material of experience as it were, which shows how a pattern drill actually works in a normal classroom situation. The class consists of 35 twelve-year-old German children in their second year of English (T = teacher; P = pupil; "English" names of individual pupils are given when identified on the tape.) The teacher has adapted a textbook exercise in which stimuli and responses are to be modelled after the following exchange:

(18) What about your class? Is it a lively class?  
Yes, it's the liveliest class of all.

(19) Lesson protocol 26.1.1976
L: Alright. Hm. Also: Wie steht's mit eurem Deutschlehrer?  
S: What about your German teacher?  
L: Ist er ein sehr geschäftiger ... Mensch?  
June: Is he busy?  
L: Ist er ein sehr geschäftiger ... Mensch?  
S: Is he a very busy person?  
L: Ja, er ist der geschäftigste von allen.  
S: Yes, he's the busiest of all.  
L: All right. Hm. Wie steht's mit Geschichte?  
S: What about history?  
L: Stella!  
Stella: what about history?  
L: Yes. Ist Geschichte schwierig?  
S: Is it difficult?  
L: Ist es ein schwieriges Fach?  
S: Is it a difficult subject?  
L: Ja, es ist das schwierigste Fach für mich.  
S: Yes, it's the most difficult subject for me.  
L: Wie sind, wie steht's mit euren Stühlen hier?  
Margaret: What about your chairs?  
L: Again!  
Margaret: What about your chairs?  
L: What about your chairs here?  
S: What about your chairs here?  
L: What about your chairs here?  
S: What about your chairs here?  
L: Sondie bequem?  
S: Are they comfortable?  
L: Nein, sie sind die unbequemsten die ich kenne, von allen.  
Anne: No, they are the most uncomfortable chairs of all.  
L: The most uncomfortable.  
Anne: Uncomfortable.  
L: Yes. The most uncomfortable chairs of all.  
Anne: The most uncomfortable chairs of all.  
L: Wie steht's mit euren Tischen?  
S: What about your tables?  
L: Sind sie groß genug?  
Anthony: Are they big enough?  
L: Nein, sie sind die kleinsten, die ich kenne, die kleinsten von allen.  
Bernie: No, they are the littlest.  
L: Let's use small.  
Bernie: No, they are the smallest.  
L: The smallest.  
Bernie: The smallest of all.  
Frank: Can we say er ... less big?  
L: They are less big ... yes, yes. Weniger groß.  
They are less big. All right. Wie steht's eigentlich mit Jack? (laughter)  
S: What about Jack?  
L: Ist er schrecklich, ein schrecklicher Typ, schreckliche Person? (laughter)  
S: Is he dreadful?  
L: Yes. Isn't he a dreadful person?  
Catherine: Isn't he a dreadful person?  
L: Nein, er ist der netteste, den ich kenne. (laughter, protest) Alice! Bernie!  
Bernie: No, he's the nicest boy of all.  
L: The nicest boy I know. The nicest boy I know.  
Bernie: The nicest boy I know.  
L: Ich stimme nicht zu.  
S: I don't agree.  
L: Er ist der schrecklichste Junge, den ich kenne. (laughter, protest)  
Judy: It is  
L: He is. (laughter) Judy!  
Judy: He's the most awful person I ...  
L: Most dreadful person I know.  
Judy: He's the most dreadful person I know.
The successive lexical variations in the bilingual pattern drill are *German
teacher* – *busy*; *history* – *difficult*; *chair* – *uncomfortable*; *table* – *small*;
*Jack* – *nice/dreadful*. In the first few instances, we do not get any specific
reaction from the class. It should be noted that the class have a *Deutsch-
lehrerin*, not a *Deutschlehrer*, so that the meaning is not personalized. The
focus of the activity is on structure rather than on meaning. Yet the exer-
cise is not carried out in a semantic void. The sentences refer to the chairs
and tables of that particular classroom, and some of the furniture was in
fact rather small for the bigger children in the class. What matters most is
that the quality of the exercise changes as soon as Jack, a member of the
class, is introduced into the exercise. Paralinguistic and non-verbal behav-
ior, also Judy’s spontaneous, ungrammatical reaction, clearly indicate that
the focus is now on meaning rather than on structure. The pupils suddenly
become aware of the fact that with the help of the new structure they can
say things meaningful to them. Thus, traditional tenets of pattern practice,
namely that variety of vocabulary should be kept to a minimum and mean-
ing be underplayed in favour of quick and easy responses have to be re-
thought.