Lesson Ideas for Children: Drilling Masked as Fun and Games

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This paper aims to provide the rationale behind the children's activities and games presented at the conference. The repetitive nature of the target language practice of the activities and games is toward drilling. The assertion is that it is possible and, in fact, essential to infuse children's lessons with repetitive practice of the target language in the guise of fun and games. In addition, this paper questions whether the current ELT balance has swayed too far toward the meaning aspect (social interaction), away from a value of form practice. The anecdotal evidence which will be raised to balance research is intended as self-reflection for teachers of children immersed in this Japanese setting. Finally, the perspective throughout will be from the arena of ESL/EFL for adults, reflected in the premise of the presentation ("back to the future"). The hope is to provide unique insight for the ELT roundtable for children.

Drilling falls out of favor

Drilling. Somehow the word evokes thoughts and images of archaic lessons from the humble beginnings of our field. The rise in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement for modern language teaching seemed to mark the fall for some of the "former" practices such as language drilling. Even the once heralded language laboratory seems a relic of the past, symbolic of the extent of the displacement.

Communicative Language Teaching has certainly led the charge toward "meaningful social interaction" in language teaching/learning. The influence of CLT has been far reaching, helping to legitimize the fields of ESL/EFL and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. With the bulk of the research focusing on adult learners, child language education inevitably has been influenced by the trends for the larger market in Japan.

Current trends are still entrenched in the CLT methodology. Savignon, whose landmark study (Savignon 1972) fueled the movement, assessed the state of affairs nearly two decades ago, stating, "By and large…the language teaching profession has responded well to the call for materials and programs to meet learner communicative needs…Communicative Language Teaching has become a term for the methods and curricula that embrace both the goals and the processes for classroom learning,

(and) for teaching practice that views competence in terms of social interaction…" (Savignon, 1991, p.261).

"Meaning-focused" (closely related to "social interaction") and "form focused" are the types of activities within the communicative scheme. According to Savignon (1991, p.261), "…for the development of communicative activity, research findings overwhelmingly support (meaning-focused) experiences." Even grammar is best introduced "when it relates to the communicative needs and experiences."

Hence, drilling became one of the tangible targets to argue against, reflecting the movement toward "meaning" or social interaction of the Communicative Language Teaching movement.

In support of form-focused drilling in this Japanese setting

Others have been critical of the focus on meaning over form, especially in Asian settings. Early on, Hofstede (1986) argued that such an orientation runs counter to the "collectivist societies" of Asia, ignoring the adherence to rituals. For Ellis (1996), meaning over form is diametrically opposed to the mastery of individual linguistic forms which are highly revered in some Asian countries. He offered as an example Chinese ideographs and the aesthetic value they hold where stroke order and character form are at least of as equal importance as the meaning. Ellis (1996, p. 213) asserts, "for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted."

More recently, some educators familiar with the rigors of teaching in this Japanese setting have acknowledged the value of form-focused practice. In a recent article, "Breathing life into some old tired drills" (2001, p. 18), David Paul, an established teacher trainer in Japan, commented "Let us accept that repetition is essential…" One of four sessions offered in the "2001 Longman Teacher Training Seminars" was on "Focusing on Form in Communicative Tasks" by Rod Ellis. The current British Council teacher training series offered in Japan includes "new drilling" as one of the focus areas. Author of the popular *J-Talk* series, Kensaku Yoshida, concluded a 1999 teacher training session by commenting that, though he often witnesses wonderful games unfold in language classrooms, he questions whether "we are doing enough" to shore up the preparation and language aspect.

The best evidence is experiential and anecdotal for those who live and teach in this Japanese setting. Our students, young and old, tend to be sticklers for form and patterns in their approach to education and even social interaction. Certainly, individual and group differences exist, but as a generality, in comparison with their non-Asian counterparts, a propensity toward "form" is difficult to deny.

In this light, form-focused practice seems warranted, especially as a connection to learning styles and expectations.

Good drilling, bad drilling

Others can attest to the detriments of drilling—bad drilling. Rather recent research has suggested that the popular activity of minimal pair practice—pronouncing and distinguishing closely related phonemes through taped exercises or with a teacher—is not of significant value. A review of current pronunciation textbooks would reveal that minimal pair practice exercises are limited or non-existent.

Anecdotally, recalled is an article by an English professor on "How to Learn English" in a student newspaper of a prominent

Japanese university. The professor's magical technique involved writing 100 perfect English sentences; memorizing them by heart; and finally, naturally acquiring the ability to interchange sections of the 100 sentences. Ta-da! English.

What separates good (successful) drilling from bad (unsuccessful) drilling then is at least two-fold:

1) The content or focus of the practice needs to be sound/appropriate/meaningful.
2) There needs to be some motivational impetus for practice. Possibilities include enjoyment (whereby practice takes place freely, almost unconsciously), a challenge (whereby students work toward some goal or prize), pressure (e.g., a strict teacher, an impending quiz), and self-interest (e.g., a conscientious student, an interest in the culture).

Therefore, successful drilling fulfills a dual role: children have an enjoyable time; teachers have satisfaction that extensive practice was achieved. In other words, it is drilling masked as fun and games.

"Drilling" to drive home the point of form focus

It needs to be reiterated that the term "drilling" is used loosely to refer to the extensive practice of the language focus. It can involve flashcards, alphabet signs, picture file cards, physical activity, singing, drawing, etc. It can focus on listening, speaking, spelling, pronunciation, writing, etc. Embedded within creative games, it is hardly recognizable as drilling in the conventional sense.

The "dreaded" term is used to accentuate the need to readjust the balance between form and meaning in lessons. Of course, it is not the case that current teaching practices are void of form practice. The strong contention here is that the movement has largely displaced the value in form practice. The suggestion is not to replace current practices and methodologies but to enhance them through engaging supplemental activities of reinforcement and review of the target language, i.e. form practice.

Even for those educators whose approach tends to be counter-drilling (e.g., whole language), is it not possible to concede the point that there is intrinsic value in spending time in a focus, especially for mastery and long term memory or retention? As David Paul says "let us accept that repetition is essential." Even a reflection on our own second language learning experiences might reveal that the lessons learned through drilling were long lasting and effectual. In the repeat performance of her award winning JALT 2001 presentation, Aleda Krauss of *Superkids* fame acknowledged that pattern drills were a notable aspect of her second language learning experience as a child.

Teachers should be in the practice of constantly seeking out ways of attacking the language focus from many angles, e.g. songs, videos, games, flashcards, physical movement activities, realia, etc. Through exploration and experience, teachers will find that it is possible to supplement lessons without impeding the pace in an assigned textbook series or the set curriculum. Supplemental activities can charge lessons with high-paced, focused energy which can serve to enhance the focus and pace of the entire lesson.

Checks and Balances

What constitutes an effective supplemental activity for form practice? Already addressed above were two basic tenets of successful drilling: motivation and appropriate focus.

1) Elaborating on Motivation: Is the activity first and foremost of (super) high interest? Does the activity match the particular styles and interests of your students? Sometimes the energy level or mood of the students on a particular day will factor into a decision of which activity and how much of it. A task helps in activity design—of course, prizes too.
2) On Appropriateness. Does the focus practice the target language? Does it flow from items in the lessons? Is it meaningful? Are the objectives clear?

Other considerations include:

3) Level. Are the instructions and game aspects easy enough to follow for the students? Does the level of interaction match the students—age, level, etc.?
4) Language skills. Which language skills are involved? (Does the activity reinforce skills of the lessons? Or, does it allow practice of skills that lessons are "short" on, e.g. not enough pronunciation, or not enough writing—as perceived by the teacher?)
5) Time Effectiveness. Is the activity "time effective"? Do you get enough practice for the minute? (For example, spending 30 minutes on an art project which is cleverly connected to an intriguing practice activity may not be appropriate for certain situations. The activities need to balance "high repetition" and "engagement.")

6) Workbook. Does the regular textbook include a workbook to review and reinforce items? Many of the popular textbook series include them. (If not, activities for practice are all the more warranted.)
7) Redundancy. Does the activity offer something new and fresh? Children tend to loose interest in materials and activities if new "twists" are not inserted. (Flashcards, for example, can be "re-packaged" in a game format to maintain interest. In scheduling activities from lesson to lesson, teachers should be mindful of varying activity type and frequency.)
8) Communication and Culture. Are interesting aspects of culture and communication easily connected to the activities, meaningfully and naturally as "bonus" lessons? (The opportunities for authentic language exchange are limited in an EFL setting. Communication phrases for games are golden opportunities: "Here you are." "Thank you." "Is it my turn?" Etc.)
9) Testing or Teaching. Does the activity essentially elicit knowledge, i.e. test, or involve students in a learning task, i.e. teach? (There is no inherent "evil" in testing for activity design. Teachers should recognize which is the focus in carrying out activities. That understanding is important.)
10) Monetary/Time Expense. Is the money/time expenditure reasonable for the creation of the activity "prompt"? Is it within budget for supplies and materials? Can the activity be used/recycled for future lessons? (Enthusiastic teachers can easily fall into becoming spendthrifts/laborers for the creation of lesson activities. Still, reasonable attention to both can pay huge dividends in the long run, saving time

and sometimes money for an arsenal of field tested super-engaging lesson activities to be used again and again with great success.)

11) Set Curriculum Concerns. Are the activities welcomed in the teaching setting and under the curriculum guide? If not, sharing the lesson ideas with colleagues may be a good start for acceptance of the new ideas. (Through personal experience, it was surprising how total disdain toward the new ideas turned to enthusiastic acceptance, leading to teacher training workshops and eventually to this JALT presentation and paper. It literally started with lesson sharing.)

12) Ongoing Success. Has the inclusion of activities for practice shown to be, intuitively, valuable supplements to class lessons? (Do the students look forward to them? Are the students enthusiastically involved in working through the tasks? Can teachers gauge aspects of retention and learning through them? If not, teachers need to re-evaluate the style, type, frequency, or value of the activities.)

How much of a good thing?

The progress in ESL textbook design for children in the last decade has been notable—higher quality paper, enhanced color, lovable characters, variations on the presentation of standard content (e.g., the alphabet) and syllabus design, etc. Still the lack of practice is glaring.

Despite the improvements, it is sometimes disheartening for teachers that progress is difficult to sense or appreciate. Is it the nature of language learning? Like planting seeds, should we be satisfied in the assumption that the fruits of our labors will be realized at a later point? Can we expect more?

To answer in the affirmative to the last question is a rather bold stance. Again, one premise is drilling masked as fun and games. The focus is strong, pace quick, motivation high, and retention and learning promising through extensive practice.

A home video which was mentioned at the conference of a real class of students working through the paces of the activity "Piano Phonics" in connection with "Apples and Bananas" would reveal that the students were involved in the following practice of the target language. (Without the visual/audio aids a description would be hard to follow. Only the gist is presented here. The number of practice repetitions is the key point.)

Activity I:

Phonics Signs

Gist:	long vowel practice; raising colored signs; listening, speaking, and singing with a task
Language skills/repetitions:	Listening -43 reps; Speaking -48 reps
Minutes:	12 minutes
Level of engagement:	High

Activity II:

Apples and Bananas

Gist:	long vowel practice; song on tape and video; listening and singing with a task
Language skills/repetitions:	Listening-39 reps; Speaking -42 reps
Minutes:	9 minutes
Level of engagement:	Very High

In sum, students were actively engaged in 172 speaking/ listening practice repetitions in just 21 minutes of activity. This compared with 38 repetitions for a similar focus in a popular commercial textbook series in about the same amount of time. The compelling evidence, though anecdotal in this form, is that the students accomplish on-target production and reception of the vowel sounds through the drilling. Mistakes are prevalent initially. Toward the end, consistent accuracy seems to have been achieved. Of course, as is the nature of language learning, follow up and continued practice are needed.

Again, any teacher's self-description of a lesson in such subjective terms needs to be considered opinion. It is tabled, however, to draw attention to the repetitions—the practice of target language. The second part of the equation is fulfilled as well—engagement. On this day, for this moment, some of the students actually beam with pride. Fun coupled with success can be doubly motivating.

Conclusion

Returning to the basics seems to be a rallying cry in education on many fronts. In this case, the advancements in child English education in Japan are acknowledged. The call is for the inclusion of pattern practice in the form of engaging activities to round out the lessons in the many wonderfully creative textbooks and materials that presently abound for children's English education. The extra step is sometimes minimal but always critical. Balancing factors of engagement and practice is important. Finally, building a repertoire of such activities to rely on should be the aim of the journeyman (or woman) children's English teacher.

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