

Creative Drilling:

Extensive Practice Masked as Fun and Games

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It seems that education on many fronts has been calling for a return to the basics. In this case, the call is to recognize the inherent value of extensive practice, even drilling, of specific language points.

The movement toward communicative language teaching has relegated some traditional practices, such as pattern drills, to a second tier of preferred methodologies. Recently, however, support seems to be building to swing the ELT pendulum back towards form and practice.

Leading educators in Japan seem, in my opinion, to be hinting at an imbalance in this arena. To cite a few: in her award winning JALT 2001 presentation, Aleda Krause (*Superkids*) acknowledged pattern drills as a notable aspect in learning an L2 as a child. Kensaku Yoshida (*J-Talk*) concluded a teacher training session in Nagoya in 2001 by questioning whether we, as teachers, are doing enough to shore up the form and practice aspects of our lessons. He mentioned that he often observes classes in which activities and games unfold wonderfully but wonders “whether we are doing enough” (personal communication). David Paul (*Finding Out*) in an article for a local daily, “Breathing life into some tired old drills” (2001), asserts that we should “accept that repetition is essential...”

It is not drilling in the conventional sense. The “dreaded” term is used here to accentuate the value of form and practice. In fact, the contention is that “creative” drilling can enhance many aspects of language lessons—most especially communication. Therefore, it is not a matter of one over the other, but of creative drilling enhancing the others. Creative drilling is not meant to supersede the regular curriculum but rather to clarify, reinforce and review aspects of regular lessons.

Best of all, the young students hardly recognize it as drilling because the extensive practice is hidden in fun and enthralling activities. In basic terms, the aim is to strike at what students want (an enjoyable time) and what teachers want (focused, engaging, and extensive practice).

Piano Phonics:

The materials needed:

Basically, all that is needed are colored strips of paper for the primary vowel sounds—a, e, i, o, u. The only important aspects to the construction of the strips are that 1) the strips should be a different color for each vowel; 2) the letters should be large enough to be easily read; 3) each student’s set should be uniform—the same as each other student’s set.

Procedures:

- 1) Each student should arrange their five strips in front

of them in “a” through “u” order, from left to right, preferably on a flat surface like a table or the floor.

- 2) The teacher should recite the vowel sounds (focusing only on long or short vowels as a set) while touching the corresponding strip in the teacher’s set to demonstrate (The teacher could tape his or her set to the blackboard/white board.).

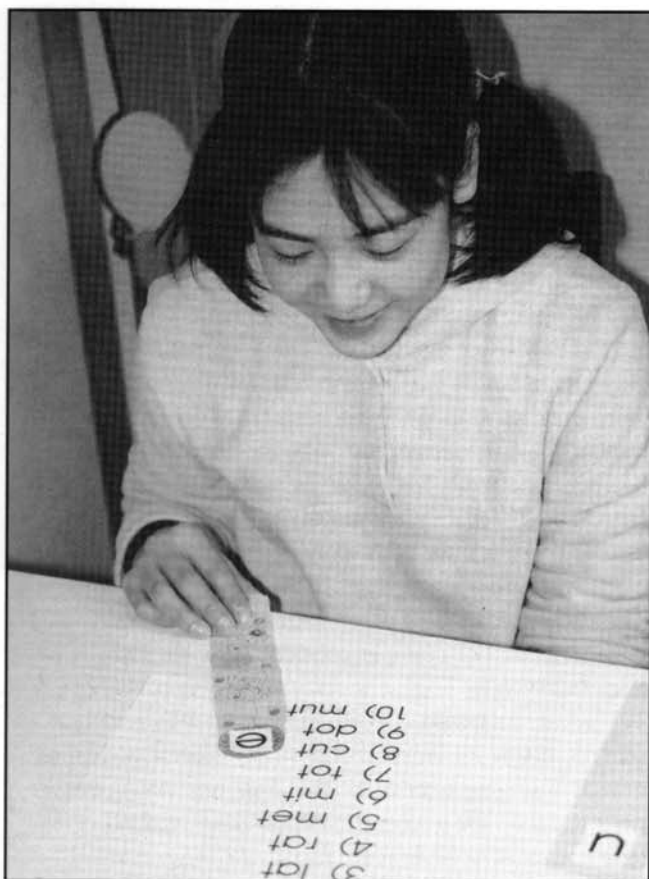
- 3) The students should repeat the vowel sounds after the teacher and touch the corresponding strips in their sets.

- 4) After just a few minutes of this practice, the fun begins. The teacher uses a slow paced, familiar melody to sing the vowel sounds. For example, consider “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” (which has the same melody as the “Alphabet Song”). The teacher replaces the words in the song with vowel sounds, mixing the vowel sounds in any order. For example, instead of singing *Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are...* the teacher SINGS (in either all short or all long vowels, whichever is the focus), *a-i, o-i, e-e, u; i-u, e-a, i-o, a...* The students listen and touch the strips corresponding to the vowels—essentially playing their piano (of course, they are not adhering to the musical notes of A and E; they are just replacing words with vowel sounds).

In this step, the students are not expected to repeat the



An advanced student helps a younger student through the paces of Piano Phonics.



Earning a "stripe" through a Magic-E "strip."

vowel sounds but only to perform the action of vowel recognition by touching the corresponding "keys." Do not use tape or CD accompaniment for the song. The pace needs to be much slower than the regular tempo of the song. In fact, teachers can pause and repeat vowels that the students are having difficulty with. The colored strips allow the teacher to see if mistakes are being made. A good way to teach/reinforce the correct recognition/pronunciation is to pause on a note in the song, singing through the range of all five vowels while touching the corresponding keys on the board. Or, if students have trouble distinguishing between two particular vowels, pause on a note and sing between the two vowels repeatedly while touching the appropriate keys.

It only takes the students a short time to understand the challenge. Depending on their level, they may be able to move quickly to the next stage.

5) In pairs, one student takes on the singer's role while a partner listens and "plays the piano." Meanwhile the teacher circulates and assists students having difficulty singing or playing. With the whole room singing and playing in pairs, inhibitions are usually quickly lost in the loud, boisterous atmosphere.

6) Over time, working through variations to the basic activity is key.

1) Experiment with different songs. It is very important for the melody to be familiar and slow/evenly paced. Some possibilities are: "Old McDonald," "Have You Ever Seen a Lassie," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "Happy Birthday," "Kaeru No

Uta," "Sakura," "Ashita ga Arusa," "Dangosan Kyodai."

2) After students master the task of pronouncing, recognizing, and repeating vowel sounds accurately, it is important to combine the vowel sounds with consonants—practicing a vowel after, before or between consonants. You will find that suddenly the challenge begins anew with the addition of the consonant sounds, even if the consonants remain uniform as a set pattern (e.g., consider the "b_g" "sandwich": *bag, big, beg, bog, bug*). The addition of consonants causes some uncertainty, but through the repetitive pattern practice students quickly gain control of the new task—such is the nature of learning to read systematically through a phonics-based approach.

The refrain from the song "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" can now be sung with all the vowel sounds sandwiched between "b" and "g." So, now the song goes something like: *big, bag, bug, bog, beg, big, bog...* It is not important to teach difficult vocabulary or for all the words to be real, e.g., if using "l" and "t", *lut* and *lat* would be acceptable.

3) For the long vowels, demonstrate on the board that an "e" has been added to the end of the 3-letter string, often taught as the "magic e" since it turns short vowels into long vowels. For example, the students could work through the long vowels sandwiched between "l" and "t", understanding that a silent "e" is in play (e.g., *late, lete, lite...*). Recognize that high repetitions of difficult consonants can be cleverly included. Here the troublesome // phoneme is included. Subsequently, an "r_t" "sandwich" can be used.

4) As a review of long and short vowels together, consider the "Magic-e Wand" practice. Make a list of three-letter words — for example: *rat, pet, sit, tot, cut*, and so on. Provide a handout for each student or have students copy the words themselves. Add an extra "e" slip to the basic Piano Phonics set. Have the students quickly decorate the extra "e", making it a wand (you can also add tape to the back of the wand or use thicker paper to make it sturdier as a wand). Demonstrate how the Magic-e wand can change short vowel sounds to long ones by placing an "e" at the end of the three letter words (e.g., *rat* becomes *rate*). Make a big motion with the magic-e wand to emphasize the effect, tapping the end of each word with the wand. Student practice can include: following the teacher, working in pairs, practicing individually, etc. Note: Again, it is not important at this stage to teach new vocabulary or for all of the words created to be real words.

5) It is possible to record a friend reciting the vowel sounds, singing the vowel songs, and reading the words on the handout. This could free up the teacher from performing the tasks and allow more time for monitoring the students.

This all might seem complicated in a written description here, but it is actually a simple series of activities surrounding a simple set of materials. As mentioned, the two key components of the activities are fun and extensive practice. The first component (fun) should be realized even through the initial attempt. As for extensive practice, consider some anecdotal evidence. A video recording of two students working through

the paces of Piano Phonics in a 21-minute session, revealed a total of 172 speaking/listening practice repetitions. This compared with about 38 repetitions for the similar focus in a popular textbook series in about the same amount of time. Best of all, the video showed that accuracy seemed to have significantly improved by the end of the session. Most importantly, the students seemed to beam with confidence.

Of course any teacher's self-description of a lesson in such terms should be considered anecdotal at best, but it is mentioned here only to draw attention to the potential for extensive practice, fun and success.

Some final thoughts.

Piano Phonics is just one example of a myriad of possibilities for creative drilling. Teachers should be in the practice of constantly seeking out ways of attacking language focuses from many angles—other possibilities include videos, flashcards, physical movement activities, games of all sorts, the use of realia, etc. The keys, however, for such activities include: 1) to specifically target the language focus in a relevant/sound manner, fitting it into the lesson as an enhancer and not as a filler; 2) to be very high in practice repetitions—often games are only fun with minimal language exchange; 3) to include an inherent challenge or task in the activity design to sharpen student focus; and 4) to be

of interest to the young students or else all of the above is nullified.

Through exploration and experience, teachers will find that it is possible to supplement lessons with creative drilling activities without impeding the pace of the assigned textbook series or set curriculum. Such supplemental activities can charge lessons with high-paced, focused energy which can actually serve to enhance the pace and focus of the entire lesson.

Extensive practice coupled with fun has been the call here. Together the two components make success a higher possibility. Even for young students, success, in small and big ways, can represent the third component in completing the cycle—a cycle of increasing returns.

References

Paul, D. (2001, September 25). "Breathing life into some old tired drills." *The Daily Yomiuri*, p.18

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