PRACTICE IN SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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1. The meaning of practice

The belief that practice is needed in order to achieve mastery in different skills (driving a car, playing the piano, sewing, cooking, etc.) is shared by laypeople and specialists alike. Language learning is not an exception to such a belief. Practice has been at the basis of language learning throughout history. The nature of practice varies depending on the setting and circumstances in which language is learned and taught, however. While practice in informal contexts implies exposure to and usage of (in this order) the language as it is naturally used by native speakers, the educational environment guides and controls what is to be learned and taught and how the learner should internalize this knowledge. Accordingly, many different varieties of practice exist in language pedagogy.

The basic key feature traditionally underlying the concept of practice is *repetition*. Even a loose understanding of practice as language use or contact with the language being learned implies some sort of repetition of linguistic items. DeKeyser (2007a) defines practice as follows: "Specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language" (p. 1). This definition also implies repetition; however, it allows for more variety, since practice is embedded in a variety of activities.

Practice remains a controversial topic in second language instruction. For example, Ellis (1993, p. 109) considers that (production) practice is important for pronunciation and formulaic knowledge, while he challenges the value of traditional practice in grammar; VanPatten (2003) favors input practice at the expense of output practice; DeKeyser (2007b) claims the need for both input and output practice to develop grammar proficiency in reception and production modes respectively.

2. The praxis of practice

Practice in second language instruction has been often identified with drills (DeKeyser, 2007a). In particular, drills were the hallmark of the audio-lingual method (ALM) in the mid 20th century as a pedagogical technique for the mastery of structures, which was accomplished through constant repetition as the response to a stimulus in the shape of a cue. Most of the times such repetition was *mechanical*: it did not involve any form-meaning connections as there was only a correct answer which could be inferred through mere analogy. As DeKeyser (2007a, p. 11) states, "mechanical drills can only serve a very limited purpose, because they do not make the learner engage in what is the essence of language processing, i.e., establishing form-meaning connections." This accounts for the negative connotation attached to drills nowadays.

Drills have sometimes been equated with mechanical drills. However, Paulston (1972) distinguished three different types of drills: mechanical, meaningful, and communicative drills. In mechanical drills, exclusive attention to form is achieved by means of the students' repeating or manipulating the cue supplied by the teacher, for example, using the pronoun "she" (the cue) in the correct way after the given model sentence, "*I have a book*." Meaningful drills allow deviation towards some sort of attention to meaning. The speakers communicate, but the content of this interaction is already known to them. Communicative drills permit exchanges in which the transmission of content is the primary goal while emphasizing form as well. Therefore, in so far as *drilling* is *meaningful*, it can be considered useful "repetitive practice."

Since the 1970s, communicative language teaching (CLT) has brought new ways of practicing to the classroom. Repetition per se may be efficient and necessary in the learning process, but it may also be boring and demotivating. Emphasis on the communicative process has brought the richness and variety of actions that speakers

engage in while communicating into the classroom. Real communicative events offer a wide range of possibilities for promoting language use in different contexts, aiming at different communicative functions; this requires the application of a variety of strategies. Authentic communicative events may, therefore, be pedagogically adapted to become models in the design of activities for instructed second language acquisition (Criado, 2010). This is the source of inspiration for techniques through which practice is implemented in most contemporary textbooks. Blank filling, matching, information and opinion gaps, controlled role plays, summarizing or finishing aural or written texts, jigsaw reading and listening, discussions, debates, extended role plays and simulations, problem-solving, essays, and so forth, contribute to enrich practice by enlarging its scope and helping to avoid the negative effects of mechanical repetitive strategies. Such variety of activity types allows a richer and more comprehensive approach to the praxis of practice.

3. Research on practice

Early research on practice in language learning tended to be very much embedded in broader research on the relative value of different language teaching "methods." By comparison, contemporary research tends to focus on much more specific aspects of practice, including: the effect of comprehension (reading and listening) versus production (speaking and writing) activities on the development of these different skills (e.g., DeKeyser, Salaberry, Robinson, & Harrington, 2002; VanPatten, 2002); the effect of different kinds of corrective feedback such as prompts, recasts, explicit correction (e.g., Leeman, 2007); and the differential effect of various activities and their sequencing on the three outcomes of accuracy versus fluency versus complexity of expression (e.g., Housen & Kuiken, 2009).

Besides ongoing research in the area of language teaching and learning itself, research in cognitive and educational psychology is also relevant to the issue of practice in language learning. Decades of work in skill acquisition theory in psychology have led researchers such as DeKeyser (1997) and Robinson (1997) to empirical work on language learning, showing, respectively, that Anderson's ACT three-stage model of skill acquisition (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004) is applicable to learning the grammar of a second language under controlled conditions, and that Logan's item retrieval model (e.g., Logan, 2002) does not seem to be. Serrano (2011) put to the test the widely accepted belief that distributed practice is better than massed practice, and found that this may not apply to the distribution of a second language curriculum over years versus months.

4. Choices in practice and pending questions

In spite of the progress made over the last half century, learners and teachers still face a bewildering array of questions about practice to which there is no clear answer. Most applied linguists would agree by now that form-meaning connections should be the core content of practice; that both input (comprehension) and output (production) are important; that a certain amount of systematic, deliberate practice is useful; that corrective feedback has its place; and that, within a limited range, different emphases can be put on accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Other issues remain more controversial from a theoretical point of view, problematic from a practical point of view, or both.

On the input side, questions remain about the ideal balance of authenticity versus systematicity (pedagogical arrangement) of input and on the best strategies for teaching learners listening and reading skills. On the output side, questions remain

about the need for systematic practice of form versus practicing forms as they come up in real-life tasks. When it comes to communicative interaction, some of the biggest questions surround the issue of corrective feedback: How much should be given, when, by whom, and how?

On top of the complexity of these questions by themselves, both from a psycholinguistic and from a pedagogical perspective, there is the issue of age and individual differences. Few would doubt that the need for (explicit) form-focused practice is bigger for adults than for children, that the desirability of explicitness in teaching, practice, and feedback depends not only on the complexity of the structure but also on the aptitude of the learner, and that the nature of students' motivation needs to be taken into account if the choice of practice activities is to be a help rather than a hindrance.

In spite of the various debates surrounding the nature of practice and its different facets, contemporary authors from different teaching perspectives agree that good praxis implies that activities should make students process form-meaning relationships and involve real-life operating conditions (DeKeyser, 2007b). Communicative practice is a must, but focus on form and deliberate practice have their place among "best practices" too.

CROSS-REFERENCES

see AUTOMATIZATION, SKILL ACQUISITION, AND PRACTICE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION; HISTORY OF LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS; INPUT-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES; OUTPUT-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES; ROLES FOR CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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