

# Unveiling the Significance: Pattern Practice in Language Learning

Abbas Eltahir Mustafa

English Language Institute, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: [abbaseltahir30@yahoo.com](mailto:abbaseltahir30@yahoo.com)

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## Abstract

This theoretical article sheds light on an aspect of traditional language teaching that is still used in foreign language teaching classrooms and commonly called drills. These repetitive drills are designed to practice specific language elements, such as grammar structures. The current paper tries to test the assumption that the practice of mechanical drills helps students of English reinforce the learning of the target language through practice. Thus, the paper mainly evaluates the role of “mechanical practice,” or “pattern practice” in improving the learning of the target language with a particular emphasis on the learning advantages of a type of mechanical practice called repetition drills. Tracing recent research on drills, the researcher concludes that if used appropriately and in some pedagogical situations contextualized, the practice of these drills can be effective for language learning and should be included as a key part of the instructional practice.

**Keywords:** Mechanical drills, Pattern practice, Repetition drills, Target language, Instructional practice

## 1. Introduction

Ever since the evolution of drills or pattern practice in the 1940s, various studies in second and foreign language continue to show the learning effects of using this pedagogical technique in the classroom practice. Thornbury (1999) attributes the use of repetition drills to the era of audio lingual method of language teaching which sees language learning as a process of habit formation that can be achieved through the repetition of dialogues and structures. Thus, among other types of drills, repetition drills were commonly used in the audio lingual method of language teaching (Larsen Freeman 2000). However, the purpose of this article is not to review the history of drills in language teaching but to show the contribution of pattern practice in language learning, by addressing the question: does the practice of repetition drills result in improved learning of the target language?

Numerous studies have confirmed the role of repetition in enhancing the acquisition of new knowledge. Alloway (2006) for instance, believes that asking a child to repeat information, can improve their memory for doing a particular task. Knop (2000) even goes far to state that memorizing vocabulary and structures is of great importance for meaningful communicative activities. Knop's view is very important as it shows the need for retrieving grammar structures and lexical items that have already been drilled to be used for communicative purposes. Thus, the author sees the necessity of including repetition drills as an important aspect of language teaching. Having sufficient stock of structures and words which have already been drilled Brooks (1960) thinks that learners can then engage in discussion that enables them to express their intentions through analogy as they usually do in their mother tongue.

Before presenting evidences on how mechanical practice or pattern practice leads to the improvement of language learning, the author would like to draw the attention of the readers that the current discussion on pattern practice views language as a productive skill and not as an implicit linguistic system. Wong and VanPatten (2003) believe that the distinction between the two is significant as it determines the objective of using drills in any language teaching program and the expected teaching effects of utilizing these drills. Besides, they believe that improving language skills is connected to aspects such as fluency and accuracy. The later, and more particularly the issue of accuracy will be the focal point of the present discussion as the author tries to look for evidences in contemporary research which support the assumption that mechanical practice can positively impact learners' structural accuracy in the target language.

## **2. Linguistic System Versus Productive Skills**

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As indicated earlier in this paper Wong and VanPatten (2003: 404) distinguish between two aspects of language learning. The first is "the creation of an underlying implicit linguistic system." This system is made up of grammar rules, vocabulary, semantics, phonology, syntax, and pragmatics. Learners acquire this linguistic system through exposure to language as the process of language learning progresses.

Different from this linguistic system is the development of language skills. This is mainly about issues such as accuracy and fluency. These two aspects of language learning are seen as the focal objective of different teaching practices (Brumfit, 1984). Further, Brumfit goes on to describe the use of pattern drills as an accuracy activity that is used to teach new target items while fluency activities such as extensive reading aim at improving learners' communication skills.

As a teacher of English, the author also believes that not all classroom activities which focus on the formal features of the language: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are considered as drills. Consequently, the author feels the need to provide a clear definition of mechanical drills as well as to distinguish between different types of mechanical drills.

### 3. Defining Mechanical Drills

Paulston and Bruder (1976) sees mechanical drills as drills where the teacher has a complete control over the students' response and where students have only one correct way of responding to stimulus provided by the teacher. Surprisingly and due to the complete control of the students' response, understanding the stimulus is not necessary to successfully do mechanical drills.

Paulston (1976:17) goes far to distinguish two types of mechanical drills: mechanical memorizing drills and mechanical testing drills. The former is to help students memorize the structures being drilled, and the later provides feedback to the teacher as well as helping students "organize the information they have learned into wholes or contrasts." Evidently without a testing drill students cannot distinguish for instance, between "I'm doing my homework" and "I am going to do my homework" as two different structures.

As stated earlier this paper aims to explore recent research on the learning benefits of mechanical drills, with a special emphasis on one type of mechanical drills called repetition drills. These are just repeating phrases and sentences to reinforce language patterns. The objective of doing these drills in early stages of language learning is to enhance what Paulston and Bruder (1976:24) calls "Kinetic memory." Since this article primarily focuses on the role of repetition drills in language learning, the author would like to list some types of repetition drills that are proposed by Paulston and Bruder (1976).

#### 3.1 Verbatim Repetition

In this type of repetition drills students just repeat the cue as it is spoken or written without any paraphrasing or alteration. They can be used as an effective technique to teach grammar elements such as subject-verb agreement and word order. The following activity on word order was provided by Paulston and Bruder (1976:25) as verbatim repetition drill:

	NP + BE + adjective
Repeat:	The campus is confusing.
	The boy is handsome.
	The house is white.
	The car is small.

#### 3.2 Open-ended Repetition

Here students are given a prompt and they are requested to respond with an extended and varied answers. Again Paulston and Bruder (1976:26) suggested the following activity on the use of going to as an open-ended repetition drill where a teacher provides the students with the following context:

"you have \$50.00. The stores are having end-of-season sales. What are you going to buy?"

Student 1: I'm going to buy a coat.

Student 2: I'm going to buy a coat and (a hat).

Student 3: I'm going to buy a coat and a hat and (a scarf).

In the previous example the teacher may expand the drill to include other pronouns to make students master the concord between subjects and verbs through practicing structures such as (she is going to buy a coat, he is going to buy a hat, they are going to buy a scarf).

### *3.3 Dialogue Repetition*

These are effective for teaching tenses where students can notice the change of tenses. Thus, learners repeat patterns with minor variations. An insightful instance on irregular past is shown in Paulston and Bruder (1976: 27):

Teacher: He teaches the class every day.

Student 1: Then he taught the class yesterday.

Student 2: No, he didn't teach it yesterday.

Student 1: Why not?

Student 2: (He was sick)

Student 1: When did he teach it?

Student 2: He taught it (the day before yesterday)

The author notices that the various types of repetition drills discussed in this paper show that these drills are used differently to accurately master different language structures.

The drilling method which involves repetitive practice of specific language elements is seen by Kumayas (2022) as a way of acquiring proficiency in the target language as learners make effective repetition of the forms and structures that seem challenging and complicated.

## **4. Repetition Drills in Early Language Classrooms**

Tracing the literature the author notices that repetition drills were considered as a distinguishing feature of language teaching during the time of audio lingual method of language teaching (Duff, 200; Wong and VanPatten, 2003; Mardhiyah, 2020). The practice of repetition drills was carried out with the aim of developing good learning habits where the teachers functioned as stimulus (Brown, 1994; Dekeyser, 1998; Hadley, 1993). Thus, it is very obvious that language learning at the time of audio lingual method was considered as habit formation (Richards, 1974). It goes without saying that the repetition drills were meant not only to acquire new forms and structures of the target language but also to enhance what had already been acquired. Commenting on the learning benefits of repetition drills Skehan (1998:33) noted "in acquisitional terms, repetition in conversation can serve to consolidate what is being learned"

## **5. Recent Studies That Favor the Adoption of Repetition Drills**

Before discussing studies that show the language learning benefits of repetition drills it is

important to acknowledge that there are some studies that do not favor the use of pattern drills as a way of internalizing grammar structure. Among these studies are (Wong and VanPatten, 2003; Farley, 2002; and Silver, 2000). The findings of these studies suggest that considerable improvements can be gained in teaching grammar structures and forms without repetition drills. Unlike Wong and VanPatten (2002) who do not recognize drills as a source of input, a more recent study conducted by Estremera (2023) considers writing drills as a primary feature of input hypothesis. However, the author of this article is less concerned with the studies that call for the elimination of drills from the instructional process as more recent studies suggest contrary findings.

Different from studies that see no benefits of using repetition drills in form-focused instruction more recent investigations suggest substantial advantages of using repetition drills to boost the process of language learning. However, the author would like to point out that rather than adopting repetition drills as a technique that must dominate the whole teaching process these studies suggest repetition drills as a technique that could be used to teach only the most challenging parts of the target language. This perspective on repetition drills is not new and is traceable back to Guth (1965) who sees repetition drills as a way of emphasizing important words and phrases. It is a way to overcome difficulties students may have in learning specific elements of the target language. Similarly, Kumayas (2022) also sees repetition drills as an instructional technique that could be used to overcome students' problems of using verbs that deal with third person singular in the simple present tense. The study presents verbs in simple present tense as an area of difference that causes comprehension problems for Indonesian learners of English as their local and national languages have completely different structures from that of English. The study which was experimental in nature with pre and posttests design concludes that the use of repetition drills was effective in solving the students' problems of using verbs in simple present tense. The students developed good understanding of the structure of verbs in simple present tense and could use it accurately.

Another study that addresses the value of repetition drills was carried out by Swanto and Din (2014). This experimental study was designed to explore the effectiveness of using repetition drills in students' writing ability. The study used pre and posttests design where students of the treatment group were introduced to the repetition drill technique to acquire the vocabulary items that help them to write a descriptive essay.

The researcher found that the students in the treatment group were able to use the language and information they got from using the repetition drill technique. Students also showed better performance in writing longer essay as well as understanding the meaning of each word they used in the text. All in all, students of the experimental group made significant gains due to the use of repetition drills and this, in turn, leads to better written performance.

The application of repetition drills in more contemporary studies have also shown interesting findings in learning other language skills, mainly speaking skills. Of these endeavors is the one undertaken by Khetaguri and Albay (2016) which sets out to show the use of drills in the development of speaking skills. The study compared two groups of preparatory school

students at a university where all classes are taught in English. The first group received textbook-based instruction while drills were used by the other group to develop speaking skills. After two months students in both groups were asked to make a five minute oral presentation. The performance of students was measured in terms of grammatical accuracy. The study has concluded that consistent use of drills contributes to the improvement of spoken proficiency. Similarly, in an influential article dated back to (1968:173) Oller and Obrecht ascertain that the benefits of a pattern drill is increased by incorporating the language of that drill into classroom communicative activities. The data of their study suggest the need for integrating “manipulative skill” and the “expressive use” in the target language instruction as it is not possible to separate the two.

Another recent study that addresses the benefits of repetition drills in enhancing the learners’ speaking ability is the one undertaken by Mendrofa and Wijaya (2022). This descriptive article sets out to demonstrate the benefits of using repetition drills in enhancing second language learners’ speaking ability. The study used different topics, including but not limited to Luggage Scale, Life Straw Water, and USB Solar Charger and the learners were asked to repeat words related to the proposed topics. Thus, the study provides learners with good opportunity of hearing the pronunciation of words from voice record and speaking them out through drilling technique. The drilling technique was meant to improve the learners’ speaking ability as well as acquiring the correct pronunciation of words. The teacher also offers instant feedback to assist learners recognize the accurate pronunciation of the drilled words.

Further, learners were shown short videos of conversations and then divided into groups and requested to repeat and act out the conversations. The study concludes that the repetition of conversations and the feedback from the teacher as regard the incorrect pronunciation make learners confident speakers.

Considering a similar view, Mardhiyah (2020: 21) proposes incorporating repetition drills within a contextual framework to maximize the benefits of using these drills in teaching speaking for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. To enhance the understanding of the grammar structures “there is/are”, the writer first explained the difference between the two structures using the learners’ first language. Then, the learners’ were asked to repeat the dialogue with correct pronunciation. Here is a quote of the dialogue:

T: “There is a picture on the wall.”

S: “There is a picture on the wall.”

T: “Yes, there is.”

S: “Yes, there is.”

T: “There are two armchairs beside the table.”

S: “There are two armchairs beside the table.”

T: “No, there are not.”

S: “No, there are not.”

After finishing drilling the dialogue, the writer asked students about things in the classroom to ensure their understanding of the structure which he had already explained. The study concludes that repetition drills help students overcome the fear of speaking English. It is also concluded that, these drills aid students in acquiring new vocabulary and structure through repetition of structured dialogue drills. This trend of contextualizing drills was, in fact, emphasized by Omaggio Hadley (2001) who calls for contextualizing drills to enhance their effectiveness.

In addition to their role in improving speaking and writing skills, repetition drills have proven effective in teaching sentence structures. Considering the importance of syntax in language Mohan (2019) tries to experimentally test the effectiveness of repetition drills in the teaching of sentence structures. The participants were 28 second year undergraduate classes who had basic knowledge of English grammar. A teaching programme of 20 hours which lasted for a period of one month aimed at teaching grammar elements such as tenses, conditional sentences, degrees of comparison, causative verbs, and voice. The pattern drills technique was used for teaching these elements where students listen and repeat the model provided by the teacher. For example, Mohan (2019:54) presents the following model for the structure of the present indefinite tense structure:

Anu likes films. (Students repeating)

Anu does not like films. (Students repeating)

Does Anu like films? (Students repeating)

Why does Anu like films? (Students repeating)

It is very obvious that the author uses different sentence structures to familiarize students with the verb “do” as well as to foster the students’ ability to use –s/-es appropriately. However, the study used repetition drills to practice other structures such as continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous. The findings of the study indicate that using drilling technique is effective in teaching the structures of English sentence as the data collected has clearly indicated students’ progress in all the tested items. However, a peculiar progress was shown in the students’ performance in voice and tenses and the least performance was observed in other tested grammar items especially degrees of comparison.

The typology of structural drills proposed by Paulston and Bruder (1976) sees response drills as mechanical drills. More recently and with the publication of Agustina (1917) these response drills have also proven effective in teaching irregular verbs to the students of English. This empirical study compared one group achievement before and after treatment. The group received teaching irregular verbs through response drills. The results of the study showed that the group engaged in response drills to learn irregular verbs performed better in the post test. Consequently, the study concludes that using response drills can be an effective technique for teaching irregular verbs.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, the author endeavors to present evidences from recent studies supporting the efficacy of drills in language learning and calling for a reassessment of this traditional technique of language teaching. These studies offer significant results which suggest the following:

- 1). Drills contribute to the improvement of language skills, namely, speaking, pronunciation, and writing. The author provides evidence for this finding from contemporary research that show the crucial role of drills in improving these skills.
- 2). It is also obvious that the consistent practice of drills enhances the comprehension of grammar structures. This is evident in the study of Kumayas where students have acquired a solid understanding of verb structures in the simple present tense. This is also seen in the studies of Agustina and Mohan where significant gains were made in acquiring irregular verbs and sentence structures.
- 3). Drills can enhance learners' expressive use of the target language. This is best shown in the experimental paper of Oller and Obrecht who calls for using the language of drills in classroom communicative activities.

In exploring the significance of repetition drills in language learning, the author has identified several language learning gains that are attained through the adoption of repetition drills. The author would like to state that repetition drills are necessary for language learning to take place. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations and suggestions that are subject to further investigation. A notable limitation of this study is the absence of information regarding the specific stage of language learning at which the adoption of repetition drills proves to be most effective. Further studies could address this issue by conducting investigations into the optimal timing of using repetition drills. This avenue could offer valuable insights into ways of maximizing the benefits of repetition drills in language learning.

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