

# Meaningful practice: Definitions, Rationales and Principles

## What is practice and what is practice for?

Practice is the learning journey from the first encounter with new language to its mastery for independent use. Without it, sounds and letters can be seen or heard, yet quickly forgotten, so practice is the route to retention. Without it, perception and production can lack understanding, so practice is about meaningful processing of knowledge. Without it, production (in speaking and writing) remains stubbornly slow and difficult, so practice develops automatization and confidence. In other words, practice is a wide array of activities that are “engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language” (DeKeyser, 2007, p.8).

## What makes practice meaningful?

Practice is meaningful when it is not mechanical, i.e. when learners need to attend to meaning as well as form (Paulston, 1970). The aim is to bring together language that has been learnt over time for the purposes of meaningful communication. This happens most successfully after **a lot** of meaningful, structured practice.

## How much practice is needed?

In short, the more, the better. In their home language, children are exposed to more than 17,000 hours of exposure by the age of four (Roffwarg et al., 1966, cited in Collins & Muñoz, 2016). However, in the secondary foreign language classroom in England, learners typically have around 450 hours of learning over five years. At this rate, it would take 189 years for learners to have the equivalent hours of input as infants in the initial stages of learning their home language! Clearly, in time-poor classroom contexts, it is crucial to make every moment of practice count. It is important to identify what learners should practise and how best they should do it.

## What are we practising?

The focus of practice is mainly to establish the knowledge of phonics, vocabulary and grammar that is required to understand or express meaning. This represents a shift away from only thinking about practising a ‘task’ (e.g., ordering a meal or writing a letter), practising a ‘function’ (e.g., expressing an opinion or apologising) or practising isolated, self-contained ‘skills’ (e.g., reading or speaking skills).

## What sort of practice is needed?

Initially, learners benefit from plentiful practice in ‘input language’ (listening and reading), through structured tasks that require learners to connect a sound-symbol correspondence, word or structure to its meaning or function. This kind of practice establishes knowledge receptively, before expecting learners to produce it in writing or speaking. Structured receptive practice is often under-represented in classrooms and textbooks. More usual are comprehension tasks that focus on understanding key words or ‘overall messages’ that can be deduced from a number of cues. But those comprehension tasks cannot deliver careful practice of small units of meaning, which takes account of the fact that learners can only pay attention to a limited number of features at any one time. There need be no rush to produce the new language; there is substantial evidence that this type of listening and reading benefits subsequent production, even when practice in production itself hasn’t happened (VanPatten, 2004; Kasprowicz & Marsden, 2018; McManus & Marsden, 2019). With grammar in particular, whilst a brief explanation before practice can speed up the rate of learning, it is the nature of the practice itself that is decisive (Marsden, 2006).

In addition to the importance of meaningful listening and reading *input*, meaningful *production* is also important because it is when learners try to produce language that they notice a 'gap' (what they can't say) and then that they test out their language use to see if they are understood (Swain, 2005). Next, therefore, learners benefit from ample practice in producing the new language in writing and speaking activities that retain the link between form and meaning. This is much easier to achieve in vocabulary practice, but we must take care to ensure that the grammar in focus always *matters* to communicate *meaning (or function)*. It is otherwise possible for controlled practice to become mechanical, e.g., where questions and answers are already known by both interactants in advance of the task, or where items follow a predictable, repetitive pattern such that they can be completed without the learners understanding the meaning or function of the grammar. Nevertheless, whilst the form-meaning link is paramount, the practice at this stage is carefully scaffolded to relieve pressure on working memory and allow the automatization of new language. The 'meaningful' aspect of this practice is the fact that the student cannot complete the task without fully understanding (connecting form with meaning) what s/he is saying.

Learning is usually most successful at this stage when manipulation of language is required to fill a genuine information gap. Meaningful practice "is better at driving the brain processes that result in successful recall" (Anderson, 2005, p. 198). Furthermore, it is often preferable for learners to need to (struggle to) retrieve the key language from memory than to have it clearly in view (e.g., in prompt word lists or full writing frames).

Over time and after sufficient practice, language stored in memory is accessed more rapidly and with less conscious effort. This process facilitates a gradual move towards freer, meaningful production practice. Characteristics of tasks at this stage of practice are likely to be:

- *Contingency* - the speaker (or writer) has something to say as a result of understanding what has been said (or written)
- *Synthesis* – language use brings together a wider range (lexical and/or grammatical) of language than in preceding structured practice, across modes (comprehension and production) and modalities (oral and written)
- *Extension* – the same language and structures are used in different contexts and for different communicative purposes
- *Choice* – the learner has a greater level of autonomy in deciding what to say and how to say it

This 'letting the language out of the box' is most likely to be successful if it follows sufficient, structured practice. It is important to note that types of task sit on a continuum of structured to freer practice. It is often the extent of the range of structures and vocabulary required by the task that determines the level of challenge.

### **The effects of different types of practice**

Overall, we expect practice to: *speed up* recall; *reduce the variability (unpredictability)* of the speed; and *reduce the rate of error*. Research has found that different types of practice help learning in different ways. We describe a selection of these practice types here.

*Simply repeating* the same speaking task, under increasing time pressure each time, can improve fluency (e.g., Lynch & Maclean, 2001; De Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

*Providing plentiful practice of one grammatical structure but in different lexical contexts* helps to strengthen knowledge of a grammatical system. That is, varying the vocabulary

whilst practising the same grammatical structure helps oral fluency and accuracy (e.g., Sato & McDonough, 2019).

*Oral corrective feedback* that explicitly prompts learners to self-correct has been shown to be an effective and reliable support to practice (Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013). Prompting self-correction drives recall and consolidates knowledge. However, whilst error correction is important, consistently focussing on all errors in all contexts can (a) mean that pupils don't learn as well from the feedback and (b) make learners reluctant to try to communicate. The willingness to 'have a go' is fundamental to practice. Teacher tolerance of error can generate conditions that promote a willingness to communicate.

*Interaction* (e.g., between learners, between learner and teacher, or between a learner and native speaker) is thought to lead to better learning than conditions where there is no interaction (see Loewen & Sato, 2018 for a review). This is thought to be because breakdowns and repairs in communication then lead to better understanding, and if you understand something you are more likely to learn it (Long, 1985, 1996). Where learners are able to interact they understand more and learn better (Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987; Vos et al., 2018). It is important to encourage learners to ask questions (e.g., Can you repeat X? What does X mean?). Teachers can make good use of contexts that arise spontaneously for this kind of practice, both for known language and/or occasionally the introduction of new language.

*Integrating modes* (comprehension and production) *and modalities* (oral and written) in practice strengthens memory and facilitates more flexible language use. Tasks that involve different combinations of input and output (e.g., reading plus speaking or listening plus writing) are therefore beneficial to learners. Examples of these tasks include:

- Transcription
- Aural → written translation
- Interactive 'zero error' dictation (pupils can ask the teacher questions about meaning and/or spelling, so they are more likely to get it right the first time)
- Dictogloss (learners listen at a speed slightly slower than normal speech but not as slow as a dictation, they take notes (usually in English), then reconstruct a version of the original passage in the target language, sometimes by discussing with their partner to arrive at one version or sometimes by themselves)
- Bi-modal presentation (Listen and read, preferably so that the text appears at the same time as the sound)
- Spot the difference (Talk and listen, then write the differences)
- Interactional running translation (Read, spoken interview (Q & A), then write)

In addition, encouraging learners to use their language for meaningful communication beyond the classroom is motivational and represents effective practice. These opportunities include face to face trips and exchanges and also online communication. Projects, competitions and awards such as the Spelling Bee, the Translation Bee, Language Leaders, the Language Challenge, and the Mother Tongue Other Tongue poetry competition all promote additional language practice.

### **How frequent should practice be?**

We know that learners need multiple encounters with language to embed it in memory (for example, research suggests between 8 – 20 encounters for learning vocabulary (Schmitt,

2008)). Findings from the few studies that have investigated the optimum intervals between practice are not conclusive (Bird, 2010; Kasprovicz & Marsden, in press; Rogers, 2015; Suzuki, 2017; Suzuki & DeKeyser, 2017). However, it is clear that practice should be frequent enough to prevent forgetting, but spaced enough to create a certain degree of 'struggle' in recall. Furthermore, practice can still be helpful beyond the point of mastery (Willingham, 2004). Most importantly, re-visiting language must be planned in to schemes of work, to ensure that it happens.

## Potential challenges with implementing practice

### i) Keeping it meaningful

In listening and reading tasks, it is relatively straightforward to isolate specific features (e.g., past tense inflections) to make their meaning essential to the task. In speaking and writing tasks, it is also possible to 'trap' a feature to make it task essential. However, it is trickier to ensure that these production tasks are not mechanical, that they avoid superficial pattern rehearsal, and that they maintain a link with meaning. In freer production tasks, it can be more difficult to force the production of specific features, but with some creative thinking about the *function* of grammar, it is usually possible to make language at least 'task useful' if not 'task essential' (e.g., Farley, 2004).

### ii) Skill-specificity and knowledge transfer

Once knowledge has been practised, it can become "skill-specific": if it has been practised for one purpose, the knowledge can be less transferable to other purposes. Therefore, learners need lots of practice in both modalities (oral and written) and both modes (comprehension and production).

### iii) Differences between modes and modalities

Systematic comprehension usually develops ahead of production. Furthermore, when reading, pupils may be expected to cope with a greater degree of unknown or unfamiliar language because they have more time to process written than spoken language. Listening to spoken language places greater demands on working memory, and so it needs to be clear, delivered at an appropriate speed, and composed to a large extent of language that has been taught and can be understood by learners.

### iv) Tensions between complexity, accuracy and fluency

Particularly in unplanned speaking tasks, where attentional resources are under the most pressure, learner production can be less accurate and/or less fluent, particularly when the complexity of the task or of the required language increases.

### v) Whole class teacher-led vs pair or group interactions

Practice with peers in pairs or in small groups provides opportunities for more pupils to talk than practice between the teacher and individuals. Pupils also typically experience less anxiety than when speaking in front of the class. However, we need to take care with the design and sequencing of pair work production tasks, particularly in L1 monolingual classrooms, to ensure that learners are able to complete them a) without resorting to English and b) with active use of the targeted form(s) from *both* pupils, the pupil who is speaking *and* the pupil who is listening.

It is useful to remember that genuine information gap interactions can also take place between the teacher and the whole class – teachers can hold information that the class doesn't have (for example, pupils often know very little about their teachers and teachers

can fabricate things too!). Also, the teacher can provide: high-quality, modified language input; feedback that reacts to learners' needs; a 'safe place' for trial and error; and more sensitive and accurate co-construction than peers can (Hawkes, 2012).

## Concluding remarks

Learners need a range of types of practice that revisit the same language in different contexts. A scheme of work plans practice to be purposeful, frequent, varied (in mode and modality) and incremental. The progress from supported to unscripted, authentic communication is gradual. Having realistic expectations about the amount and type of practice needed can guide teachers to limit the *quantity* of new language, in order to help pupils to eventually use language they have already encountered in different contexts more spontaneously, including under time and communicative pressure.

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