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ЗАКРЕПЛЕНИЕ ГРАММАТИЧЕСКОГО МАТЕРИАЛА НА ПРАКТИКЕ

GRAMMMAR THROUGH PRACTICE

Summary. We have looked at ways that grammatical knowledge is automized through practice.
Аннотация. Рассмотрены способы закркпления грамматических знаний на практике.

So far we have been looking at ways of *presenting* grammar. But, as with any skill, simply knowing what to do is no guarantee that you will be able to do it, or that you will be able to do it well. Teachers will be familiar with learners who are fast and fluent speakers, but whose language is practically unintelligible because of the errors they make. There are also learners whose language is virtually error free, but who are painful to interact with because the production of every word is a struggle. A happy balance would be learners who are able to fine-tune their output so as to make it intelligible but who, at the same time, are equipped with a core of readily available, fairly automatic, language, so that they can cope with the pressures of realtime communication. It is the purpose of practice activities to target these two objectives: **precision** at applying the system, and **automisation** of the system. These two objectives are called, respectively **accuracy** and **fluency.** There is a third type of student: the one who **is** reasonably intelligible and at the same time fluent, but who can express only a relatively limited range of meanings. If such students are going to make any headway in the language, it is not enough simply to be able to speak fast and accurately.

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They also need to be able to reorganise (or **restructure)** what they know in order to make it more complex. Practice activities may also provide this kind of learning opportunity: through practising the grammar, learners come up against situations which force them to reorganise their current knowledge. So, a third objective of practice is directed at **restructuring** - at integrating new knowledge into old.

To achieve accuracy the learner needs to devote some attention to **form,** i.e. to 'getting it right'. Attention is a limited commodity, and speaking in a second language is a very demanding skill. Learners have only limited attentional resources, and it is often difficult for them to focus on form and meaning at the same time. There is inevitably some trade-off between the two. So, for learners to be able to devote attention to form, it helps if they are not worrying too much about meaning. That suggests that practice activities focused on accuracy might work best if learners are already familiar with the meanings they are expressing. This, in turn, suggests that expecting learners to be accurate with newly presented grammar is a tall order. It may be the case that accuracy practice should come later in the process, when learners have been thoroughly familiarised with the new material through, for example, reading and listening tasks.

As we said, accuracy requires attention. Attention needs time. Research suggests that learners are more accurate the more time they have available. They can use this time to plan, monitor and fine-tune their output. Therefore rushing students through accuracy practice activities may be counterproductive. Classroom activities traditionally associated with accuracy, such as drilling, may not in fact help accuracy that much, especially where learners are being drilled in newly presented material.

Finally, learners need to value accuracy. That is, they need to see that without it, they risk being unintelligible. This means that they need unambiguous feedback when they make mistakes that threaten intelligibility. By correcting learners' errors, teachers not only provide this feedback, but they convey the message that accuracy is important. Knowing they are being carefully monitored often helps learners pay more attention to form.

To summarise, then, a practice activity which is good for improving accuracy will have these characteristics:

1. **Attention to form:** the practice activity should motivate learners to want to be accurate, and they should not be so focused on what they are saying that they have no left-over attention to allocate to how they are saying it.

2. **Familiarity:** learners need to be familiar with the language that they are trying to get right.

3. **Thinking time:** monitoring for accuracy is easier and therefore more successful if there is sufficient time available to think and reflect.

4. **Feedback:** learners need unambiguous messages as to how accurate they are – this traditionally takes the form of correction.

Fluency is a skill: it is the ability to process language speedily and easily. Fluency develops as the learner learns to **automise** knowledge. One way they do this is to use pre-assembled **chunks** of language. Chunks may be picked up as single units, in much the same way as individual words are learned. Common expressions like *What's the matter?* and *D'you knoiv what I mean?* are typically learned as chunks. Chunks may also be acquired when utterances are first assembled according to grammar rules, and then later automised. Fluency activities are aimed at this process of automisation.

Too much attention to form may jeopardise fluency. So practice activities aimed at developing fluency need to divert attention away from form. One way of doing this is to design practice tasks where the focus is primarily on **meaning.** By requiring learners to focus on what they are saying, less attention is available to dwell on how they are saying it. In this way, the conditions for automisation are created.

One way of engineering a focus on meaning is through the use of **information gap** tasks. Real communication is motivated by the need to bridge gaps: I need to know something – you have the information – I ask you and you tell me. In information gap tasks the production of language is motivated by a communicative **purpose,** rather than by the need to display grammar knowledge for its own sake. A communicative purpose might be: to find something out, or to get someone to do something, or to offer to do something. It follows that the exchange is a **reciprocal** one – there is as much a need to listen as there is to speak. This, in turn, means that speakers have to be mutually intelligible (not always a condition in drill-type activities). Furthermore, there is an element of the **unpredictable** involved – what if you don't have the answer I am looking for, or you refuse my request, or you reject my offer?

All these elements – purposefulness, reciprocity, mutual intelligibility, and unpredictability – are features of real-life communication. Classroom tasks that incorporate these features are known as **communicative tasks** and help prepare students for the cut-and-thrust of real communication. But more than that - because they are message-focused they serve to shift the learner's attention away from a concern for form, and in this way they help develop fluency.

To summarise: where **fluency** is the goal, practice activities should have these characteristics:

1. **Attention to meaning:** the practice activity should encourage learners to pay attention less to the form of what they are saying (which may slow them down) and more to the meaning.

2. **Authenticity:** the activity should attempt to simulate the psychological conditions of real-life language use. That is, the learner should be producing and interpreting language under real-time constraints, and with a measure of unpredictability.

3. **Communicative purpose:** to help meet these last two conditions, the activity should have a communicative purpose. That is, there should be a built-in need to interact.

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Chunking: at least some of the language the learners are practising should be in the form of short memorisable chunks which can be automised. **Repetition:** for automisation to occur, the practice activity should have an element of built-in repetition, so that learners produce a high volume of the targeted forms.

Restructuring involves integrating new information into old. Traditionally, restructuring was meant to happen at the **presentation** stage. That is, learners were expected to learn a new rule, and straightaway incorporate it into their 'mental grammar'. More recently there has been some scepticism as to whether this really happens. There is a growing belief that restructuring can occur during **practice** activities. One school of thought argues that communicative activities (such as information gap tasks) provide a fertile site for restructuring. This is because such activities **problematise** learning: what if you don't understand my question, or I don't understand your answer? This communication breakdown forces the learner to take stock and re-think. In turn it offers the potential for **negotiation.** Negotiation of meaning – the collaborative work done to make the message comprehensible – is thought to trigger restructuring. In fact, some early proponents of the communicative approach considered that this was ah that was necessary for language acquisition to take place.

Restructuring is sometimes experienced by learners as a kind of flash of understanding, but more often, and less dramatically, it is the dawning realisation that they have moved up another notch in terms of their command of the language.

Practice activities designed to aid restructuring might have these characteristics:

1. **Problematising:** having to deal with a problem often seems to trigger restructuring. For example, when learners are put in a situation where the message they are trying to convey is misinterpreted, they may be forced to reassess their grasp of a rule. Moreover, the input they get as they negotiate the meaning of what they are trying to express may also help reorganise the state of their mental grammar.

2. **Push:** the activity should push learners to 'out-perform their competence' – that is, to produce or understand language that is a notch more complex than they would normally produce or understand.

3. **Scaffolding:** there should be sufficient support (or **scaffolding)** to provide the security to take risks with the language. This means the practice activity should try to balance the new with the familiar. Scaffolding could, for example, take the form of telling a familiar story but from a different perspective. Teachers often provide students with scaffolding in the way they interact with them, repeating, rephrasing or expanding what they are saying in order to carry on a conversation.

Few practice tasks, whether their objective is accuracy, fluency, or restructuring, are likely to meet all of the criteria listed above. On the other hand, some tasks may incorporate features that suit them to more than one bjective, e.g. both fluency and accuracy. Not all learners will respond in the same way to the same activity: differences in ability, learning style and motivation will affect the degree to which they engage with the task. This suggests that teachers need to be familiar with a fairly wide repertoire of practice activities. It also suggests that time spent in presenting new language should not be at the expense of time that could be spent on providing a useful variety of practice activities.