

Do you often avoid drilling new language items with your students? Is this because you don't think it's useful or is it because you are not sure how to go about it? This lesson aims to get you thinking about the role of drilling in language-focused lessons and demonstrate how to go about it.

Task 1 – To drill, or not to drill?

Two teachers are discussing drilling in the staffroom.

Mona: Then after I've done feedback on the matching tasks, I thought I'd drill the words.

Louise: Really?

Mona: Yeah – why not?

Louise: I never drill language – it's so old-fashioned.

Mona: Do you think so? I was taught to drill on my training course and that was only last year.

Louise: I've been teaching for just over ten years now and I've never drilled anything.

Mona: Interesting. What do your students say?

Louise: Nothing.

Mona: Mine never complain when I drill them.



Whose opinion do you agree with? Jot down your ideas / suggestions on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 

Task 1 Feedback

Drilling is a teaching skill that can sometimes be considered controversial. Teachers who don't like it see it as a relic of the audio-lingual approach to language teaching. Other teachers think that drilling is useful because that is how they like to learn a language. There is another group of teachers who avoid drilling because they are not sure of how to drill. This lesson will work through some of those issues associated with the skill and describe different drilling procedures.

Key Skill

What is drilling? In its most basic form drilling involves teachers asking students to repeat individual words or utterances. The teacher gives a model of the language and the students repeat it either in unison or individually or both.

Task 2 – What are some of the issues?



Below are some opinions about drilling. Sort them into two groups, opinions ‘for’ drilling and those ‘against’.

NB. Two of the opinions are probably NOT true. Can you decide which two they are?

1. Many students expect their teachers to drill new language.
2. Part of language learning is a physical skill. Drilling is like sending students’ speech organs to the gym.
3. Drilling doesn’t involve real communication.
4. Drilling helps students to memorise new language.
5. Drilling can help students with pronunciation. It allows them to feel new sounds.
6. Drilling means that the teacher imposes new language on students and is unnatural.
7. Even if teachers don’t drill, students will often quietly drill themselves because they want to have a go at saying new language items.
8. Drilling won’t necessarily lead to internalisation and acquisition of new language.
9. Drilling helps students to understand new language.

for	against

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Drilling probably does not aid the acquisition or learning of new language items, but it can help students with the pronunciation of language. It may not be a natural and highly communicative classroom activity, but students seem to want to be drilled nonetheless. It helps if students understand the language that teachers drill. In other words, the meaning should be clarified first otherwise drilling simply involves mindless repetition.

Task 3 – Ways of drilling



Match the five ways of drilling 1 to 5 with the definitions a to e and the examples i to v.

Ways of drilling	Definitions	Examples
1. choral		
2. individual		
3. open pair		
4. substitution		
5. transformation		

Definitions

- a. Students repeat an utterance. The teacher says or holds up a new word or phrase. Students repeat the first utterance, but replace a word or phrase from that utterance with the new word or phrase.
- b. The teacher drills one student in a question and a second student in an answer to that question. The two students then repeat their question and answer exchange with the rest of the class listening.
- c. The teacher says a word or an utterance and the whole class repeats that word or utterance together in unison.
- d. The teacher says an utterance and the students say something similar to the teacher's utterance, but, in doing so, they change a key structure.
- e. The teacher says a word or utterance and then nominates a student to say that word or utterance.

Examples

- i. Teacher: 'He's just gone home'. - Jin Yong.
Student: He's just got home.
- ii. Teacher: 'He's just gone home'
Students: He'd just gone home.
- iii. Teacher: 'Where's he gone?' - Yang.
Student: Where's he gone?
Teacher: 'He's just gone home.' - Sven.
Student: He's just gone home.
Teacher: OK again. Question – Yang. Answer – Sven.
- iv. Teacher: 'He's just gone home.' - Everyone.
Students: He's just gone home.
- v. Students: He's just gone home.
Teacher: 'the bank.'
Students: He's just gone to the bank.


Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Drilling does not have to always be repetitive and uncreative. Substitution and transformation drills can provide students with a small degree of creativity and cognitive effort.

Task 4 – Five steps to drilling



Numbers 1 to 8 below are eight steps in the process of drilling a new word or utterance. Put these steps in the correct order. Letters a to h give a rationale for each step. Once you have ordered the steps, match a rationale to each step. 

Eight steps of drilling	Rationale
1. Once students give you the word or utterance, provide your own oral model at a natural speed ...	
2. Students repeat the language together as a group ...	
3. Having broken down the oral model of the language, repeat it again at a more natural speed	
4. If the word or utterance you want to drill is on the white board, start by wiping it off ...	
5. Re-elicite the language you want to drill using the prompts ...	
6. Nominate individual students and get them to repeat the word or utterance ...	
7. Show students a prompt – a picture or some key words that relate to the language you want to drill ...	
8. Highlight any key pronunciation features of the new language – demonstrate these orally rather than using the white board ...	

Rationale for each step

- a. ... so that students have some visual representation of the language you want to drill.
- b. ... so that you can check the pronunciation of the new language by individual students.
- c. ... so that the first oral model that students hear is a natural one.
- d. ... so that students have to think a little bit about the language they are going to repeat.
- e. ... so that students focus on pronunciation features such as stress, weak forms and linking.
- f. ... so that all students have the opportunity to say the new language without being heard by the rest of the class.
- g. ... so that students don't just read the new language aloud and they have to listen carefully in order to repeat.
- h. ... so that students will repeat the language with a more natural rhythm.

Thinking about your teaching ...

Find a colleague who speaks a second language that you don't know at all. Ask your colleague to give you two or three mini-lessons in that language and specifically ask that person to drill you in the new language. After the lesson write down your reactions to being drilled and think about why you had those reactions.

Note your reactions and thoughts in your *Teaching log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

If you don't normally drill your students, try doing it over a period of about four or five lessons. If you normally drill, try not doing it over the same period of time. After that, give your students a questionnaire about drilling – did they like it or did they miss it? Why?

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 255 - 260 of *Learning Teaching (2nd edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on drilling.

For some practical ideas on drilling options see pages 206-7 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007).

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 2 g) Correcting spoken errors:** deals with error correction of students' spoken errors in the classroom.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

for	against
<p><i>1. Many students expect their teachers to drill new language.</i></p> <p><i>2. Part of language learning is a physical skill. Drilling is like sending students' speech organs to the gym.</i></p> <p><i>5. Drilling can help students with pronunciation. It allows them to feel new sounds.</i></p> <p><i>7. Even if teachers don't drill, students will often quietly drill themselves because they want to have a go at saying new language items.</i></p>	<p><i>3. Drilling doesn't involve real communication.</i></p> <p><i>6. Drilling means that the teacher imposes new language on students and is unnatural.</i></p> <p><i>8. Drilling won't necessarily lead to internalisation and acquisition of new language.</i></p>

Probably not true: 4. Drilling helps students to memorise new language.

Probably not true: 9. Drilling helps students to understand new language.

Task 3 – Feedback

- 1. choral c and iv
- 2. individual e and i
- 3. open pair b and iii
- 4. substitution a and v
- 5. transformation d and ii

Task 4 – Feedback

- 4. g
- 7. a
- 5. d
- 1. c
- 8. e
- 3. h
- 2. f
- 6. b.

