

From drill to discourse.
Exploiting the combinatorial power of language.
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The lecture is an attempt to revitalise pattern practice methodology with concrete examples taken from various classrooms. Observations of how learners acquire languages naturally without pedagogical interventions provide a theoretical foundation. In the first part, I argue that double comprehension (understanding both functions and forms) is the most important single factor in language acquisition. I then present semi-communicative bilingual drills as an exercise type which facilitates pattern recognition, achieves fluency through oral repetition and focuses on meaning rather than on syntactical manipulation. Although the drills work with contextless sentences, these sentences can be processed as fragments of discourse and can lead right into communication, as documented in lesson transcripts. The problem of learning transfer from drill speech to real speech can thus be solved.

Natural language acquisition

- Children hear complete utterances, not just individual words.
- They understand messages, i.e. what is meant, and later produce messages.
- But the input they receive must ultimately be comprehended at two levels: They must also detect / extract the recurring patterns behind the utterances, they must free the words. Why?
- Because they must learn to recombine the meaning components in new ways in order to say things they've never heard before.
- They try new sentences & novel ideas and thus make infinite use of finite means.

Foreign language teaching

- Double comprehension is the most important single factor in language acquisition and foreign language learning.
- 3hours-per-week learners don't get the amount and type of exposure necessary for both understanding the messages and finding the patterns all by themselves.
- But they all have a naturally acquired language – a huge cognitive capital accumulated over years – which is used to crack the code of foreign constructions.
- Teachers must work with this capital rather than ignore it.
- Sentences taken from well-known texts must be perceived as sentence patterns and become a recipe for many more sentences / ideas.
- Bilingual pattern drills with a dual focus both on fluency and on content can be processed as fragments of discourse and lead right into communication.

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