WHAT'S WRONG WITH PATTERN PRACTICE?

Francis C. Johnson

Part I: Introductory

      Pattern practice is probably one of the most widely used and variously interpreted terms in the lexicon of modern teachers of foreign languages. Every method textbook describes it and defines it usually in terms which allow for such widely differing interpretations of both the term 'pattern' and 'practice' as would justify the prose of a columnist predicting fortunes by 'the Stars'. The classic non-definition occurs in Robert Lado's important book Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach in which under a heading "Definition of Pattern Practice" he writes,

> "There are many types of pattern practice, but simple repetition
> and conscious-choice drill on linguistic problems are not pattern
> practice in this technical sense. These are preceding stages of
> practice. Pattern practice is rapid oral drill on problem patterns
> with attention on something other than the problem itself. "[1]

However, most teachers would agree that pattern practice is a procedure for drilling a number of similarly structured sentences so that the overall pattern of the sentences rather than the specific words of each sentence is emphasized and learned by the person practising.

      Pattern practice in its modern form was developed, not as some writers would have us believe, in the United States immediately after the Second World War, but by Harold Palmer[2] and others before him in the early years of the twentieth century and there has been very little development in actual techniques of teaching foreign languages since the publication of The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages in 1917. As the late Charles C. Fries pointed out in 1958, "What we have learned is not a 'new method' nor a set of new techniques of teaching. It is a new understanding of the facts of language itself - a new understanding that can help us measure the effectiveness of the various methods that we have already."[3]

      What's wrong then with pattern practice? It's simply out-moded. It's the 1917 line ten inches above the ankle that needs a 1968 line ten inches above the knee.

For many years teachers have been unhappy about pattern practice. They have been unhappy that their "modern" methods of teaching languages are intrinsically dull and have not achieved the quick effective results claimed of them by many writers, including textbook writers. It is the Bloomfieldian exhortation to,

> "Copy the forms, read them out loud, get them by heart and then
> practice them day after day, until they become entirely natural
> and familiar"[4]

that has led to the essential dullness of pattern practice drills. It is the very failure of modern language teaching pedogogy to exploit what Fries called "the new understanding of the facts of language itself" that helps to produce such disappointing results

In this paper I would like to briefly consider two aspects of language teaching pedagogy that appear to me to not measure up to the requirements of pattern practice as an effective way of establishing satisfactory habits in the learning of a new language. The first concerns the nature of language as a means of communication and the second concerns classroom organization for pattern practice.

Part II: Pattern Practice and Language as Communication

We use language to communicate with others. This facile statement is used by all textbook writers and methods writers in the field of second or foreign language teaching to explain what their fundamental premise in language teaching is. We might expect then to find language taught as communication and practised as communication following the ways in which we actually use language to communicate, i.e., following closely the social functions of language.

A dictionary will define language as being a system of symbols used by a group of people to transmit ideas or feelings. But as Kluckhohn and many others have pointed out, (and I quote from Mirror For Man).

> "The semanticists and anthropologists agree that this is a tiny,
> specialized function of speech. Mainly, language is an instrument
> for action. The meaning of a word or phrase is not its dictionary
> equivalent but the difference its utterance brings about in a situation
>
> . . . .
>
> The primary social value in speech lies in getting individuals to work
> more effectively together and in easing social tensions."[5]

This dynamic view of language as a vehicle for action, for causing change to take place in behaviour, conflicts markedly with the selection of language content (in the form of sentence patterns) and the techniques of presentation and practise which modern language teaching textbooks prescribe.   Learners practise sentence patterns which describe ideas, situations and emotions (either in statement or question/answer form) without ever using that language to cause change, or to generate action in others.

In the usual second or foreign language teaching lesson the teacher will present, in an appropriate context which will illuminate the meaning of the concepts in-volved, a series of sentences, similarly structured and representing a "problem" or "significant" pattern in the language being learnt.   Students may then (in the best classes) practise several sample sentences of this pattern, saying the pattern over and over either by substituting for certain items in the original sentence given or by applying certain transfor-mation rules to generate a new sentence from a given cue.   Although ideally other members of his practice group may be paying attention to him they might just as well not be there for in most instances they do not participate except when it is their turn to utter an example of the pattern, and in the relatively rare instances when they are required to make a re-sponse it is usually only a formulaic answer pattern which is predictable.   In this practice situation language and thought never meet and responsibility for selection of what one says is minimal.

Moreover, communication here is a one way process, a situation which in real life exists only rarely in monologues such as this.   Hearers get no active practice in hearing and responding to what they hear (except in answering questions as mentioned above, and here responses are often controlled so that affirmative answers are given in a block and then negative answers given in a block, thus destroying any value that the hearer might gain from having to decide which response is appropriate).

What we require of pattern practice to make it serve as preparation for using language in everyday situations of communication is a context in which learners become dependent on each other for getting something done by using language alone – what we might call a responsive environment in which the speaker and the hearer must cooperate by using language to get some overt act completed.   The speaker for his part must discern a need to get something done and select and use the language which will achieve this.   The hearer responds to the instruction of the speaker (given only by linguistic symbols) by com-pleting the task.   In this simple practice context we can accommodate all the variety of

stimuli and responses that are likely to apply to communication through language in the everyday world. The stimulus which prescribes the language to be selected by the speaker may be either linguistic or non-linguistic (picture, realia, motion, gesture etc.). The Speaker's response is linguistic (his message must be framed in language alone, without the use of gesture). The stimulus for the hearer is linguistic and his response may be either linguistic or non-linguistic.

Such a practice context would of course demand the use of sentence patterns quite different from the majority of those currently to be seen in textbooks. There would be a preponderance of request and question patterns. However, there is nothing sacred or imperative in the use of a majority of statement sentence patterns. Almost all of the syntactic contrasts in the English language for example can be incorporated into a sentence framework which is either a request or a question.

It is time for language teachers to assess, as Fries has pointed out, their techniques of language practice in terms of the facts of language itself and in terms of the social purposes for which they are teaching language.

Part III: Pattern Practice and Classroom Organization

One of the most difficult problems associated with the conduct of pattern practice in the classroom is the problem of individual practice of sentence patterns being learnt. Most language teachers commence practice of a sentence pattern by some rapid choral drills to "fix" the form of the pattern in the students' minds. This choral work consists of the teacher providing some cue, either linguistic or non-linguistic which will elicit from the class a sentence different in actual words but having the same pattern as the one practised immediately before it. Many teachers then go on to do spot checking of individual students having them generate new sentences of the pattern using a different but known cue. Such a technique leads to a very low density of individual practice, a situation which most teachers simply accept. Others argue that although there is only one person practising at a time other students are listening and therefore learning.

Some teachers seek to achieve a higher density of individual practice by using the language laboratory while others go to great lengths to structure pattern practice with the class divided into small practice groups, each group acting independently and individuals within the group taking carefully regulated turns to practise the sentence pattern. In the former scheme, correction is done either by the student comparing his response with

that supplied on the tape or by a monitoring teacher interrupting the progress of his tape to make any necessary correction. In the latter scheme either a designated pupil or the group as a whole acts as the check on accuracy.

What's wrong with these procedures for classroom organization of pattern practice? What is wrong or better, not desirable, is the need for a teacher or a teacher-substitute to act as a continual arbiter of correctness. In other fields of education great progress has been made in shifting the focus of control in learning away from the teacher and on to the learner himself. The old fashioned role of teacher as omniscient information source and arbiter of correctness is still with us in language teaching and teachers are very reluctant to give up this role asserting that the teacher must be the continual check in any habit-forming process to insure that bad habits are not learnt for these will prove very difficult to eradicate later on.

What is needed in the organization of pattern practice is some type of automatic check which will show students that their response is correct when it is correct and wrong when it is wrong. Let me describe simply an elementary example of such an automatic check.

In the sentence pattern, we are practising selection of some components of noun clusters, namely the pre-modifiers, numerals, colours and the noun nuclei book, pencil, pen with the corresponding singular/plural morpheme in agreement with the numeral selected. Our sentence pattern might be:

Give me	one	red	book(s)
	two	blue	pen(s)
	three		pencil(s)

Imagine two young students sitting opposite each other at a table. On the table there are red pens, blue pens, red books, blue books, red pencils, blue pencils. There is also a set of picture cards. On one card there is a picture of a red book, on another two blue pencils etc. etc. The cards are in random order and are face down on the table.

One of the students picks up the top card and looks at it (it has a picture of two blue pens on it). He says to the second student, without showing him the card, "Give me two blue pens." The second student picks up two blue pens and hands them to the first

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student who now shows the picture card and both students see that the objects match the pictures. They have completed a task by cooperating with each other using language in a situation of communication. They have had their actions reinforced.

Now it is the second pupil's turn. If a mistake occurs then the objects will not match the picture and this indicates that communication has not taken place.

The correction takes place automatically without the intervention of the teacher. In this way there is also a maximum density of individual practice of the sentence pattern for each student is, with every turn, either acting as hearer or speaker.

Part IV: Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to discuss two important problem areas of pattern practice associated with techniques of teaching second or foreign languages. Whether or not the suggestions for overcoming these represent viable solutions to the problems or simply interesting but impractical ideas remains to be seen. But whatever, language teachers must seriously review the contemporary techniques of language practice which have remained virtually unquestioned since the beginning of the twentieth century.

N.B.   The concepts of language practice outlined above were originally formulated by Dr. Gerald Dykstra, now of the University of Hawaii. They form part of the conceptual framework for a proposed set of materials to be developed jointly by the University of Hawaii and the University of Papua and New Guinea.

Footnotes

[1] Lado, Robert. Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach New York: McGraw Hill, 1964. p. 105.

[2] See, Palmer, Harold E. The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages. New York: World Book Company. 1917.

[3] Fries, Charles C. "On the Oral Approach," Lectures by C.C. Fries and W.F. Twadell, Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1958. p. 14.

[4] Bloomfield, Leonard, Outline Guide to the Study of Foreign Languages. New York: Linguistic Society of America. 1942. p.12.

[5] Kluckhohn, Clyde. Mirror for Man. New York: McGraw Hill 1949