To drill or not to drill? Towards a holistic approach in teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract

The history of teaching English can be seen as a pendular swing between extremes. Each time a new approach was introduced, it usually contrasted with the previous one. Essentially, there have been two main approaches in English language teaching: one focusing on the rules and structure of the language (analysis) and the other focusing on using the language in real-life situations (use). Throughout the centuries, we have seen this back-and-forth movement. This paper aims to demonstrate that these opposing views can be merged into a more holistic approach to language teaching.

As a case in point, this article explores Audiolingualism and the practice of drilling. In the past, drilling was a central component of Audiolingual methods, often involving repetitive exercises without context. However, recent research indicates that when drills are meaningful and connected to real-life situations, they can serve as the foundation for higher-level thinking skills. The paper discusses different types of drilling and argues that if drill activities are engaging and inventive, they can play a vital role in the modern English language classroom, aligning with current teaching practices.

In conclusion, the paper suggests that there is no single best method for teaching foreign languages. Instead, it proposes that classroom activities should be chosen based on their effectiveness in promoting learning.

Keywords: The ELT pendulum; Audiolingualism; Drill activities; Lower-order thinking; High-order thinking

Background: the ELT pendulum

The history of ELT methods has often been presented as one which is similar to a pendulum swing between extremes. Each time a new teaching philosophy was put forward, it was most of the time in sharp contrast to the ideas of a previous approach. As a result, we have often moved from one extreme to another extreme. As McCarthy (2017) reminds us, people were learning foreign languages as early as the Middle Ages. The Lingua Franca at the time was Latin and people learned spoken Latin in order to be able to communicate when they were travelling around Europe. So, people learned spoken grammar and the focus was entirely on *using* Latin rather than learning how the rules governed the language (McCarthy, 2017).

Then things changed when science became dominant: Latin was still used but as the language of thought, but it was written rather than spoken. As a result, written grammar prevailed when Latin was superseded by English as a national vernacular. William Bullokar, who wrote the first grammar of English in 1586, attempted to show that English was bound by as many rules as Latin. This is when Latin terminology was imported into English with words such as *clause* (clausa), *verb* (verbum) or *perfect* (perfectum). So, the focus shifted from the ability to use the language to an emphasis on analysing the rules of the language.

Towards the end of the 17th century, the focus changed again, from a rule-based analysis of the language back to an emphasis on utility when Comenius highlighted an essentially inductive approach to language learning which was based on exposure to the target language rather than studying its rules (Comenius, 1657, cited in Thornbury 2019).

As Figure 1 shows, there have essentially been these two types of approaches in ELT: the ones that focus on analysing the language (or declarative knowledge), and the ones which focus on using the language (or procedural knowledge). Over the centuries, we have witnessed these backs and forths on the ELT pendulum. It is important, however, to consider what can be learned from each approach (Renandya, 2020).

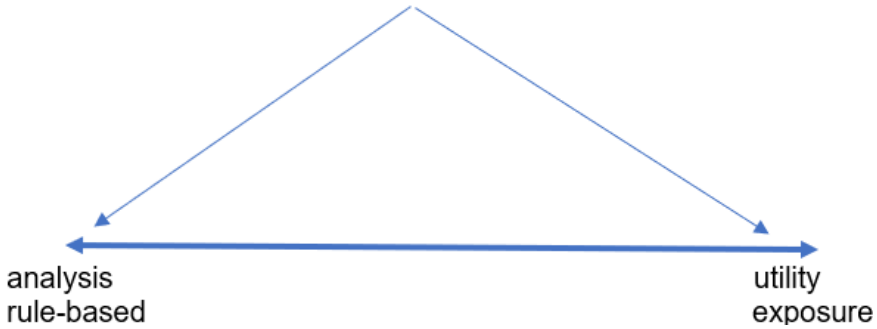

Figure 1. *The ELT pendulum*

This paper aims to show that these two main dimensions, which are often presented as being opposed, can in fact be reconciled and put together into a more holistic approach to language teaching, an approach that combines the best practices of the methods that have been used in ELT. To illustrate this, drilling activities will be presented here as an example of practice that prevailed in the days of Audiolingualism. The paper argues that drill practice activities are still relevant in today's EFL classrooms and goes on to suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all methodology.

1. Where do drills fit in?

To answer this question, it is necessary to briefly locate drilling in the context of language teaching methods throughout history, and see whether it can be accommodated within current methodologies.

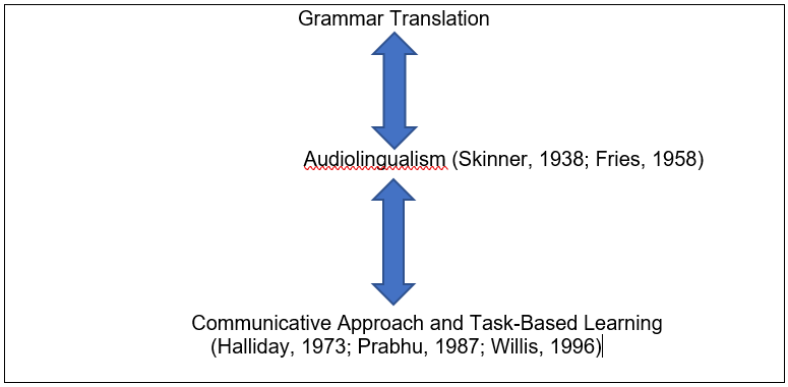

Figure 2. *Major Developments in ELT*

As Figure 2 shows, Audiolingualism - the method which gave rise to drills - came as a reaction against the teaching of the rules of English and as a shift away from the emphasis on reading and writing found in Grammar Translation. Following the precepts of structuralists (Fries, 1958) and behaviorists (Skinner, 1938), Audiolingualism put the focus on speaking and considered language as a set of habits to be learned. Instead of rules, patterns were taught and repeated with teaching procedures including mechanical drills, learning dialogues off by heart and repetitions. Little attention was devoted to vocabulary as it was believed that learners would pick it up by practising the patterns of language (Ur, 2018). As with Grammar Translation, the Audiolingual method maintained the focus on accuracy and the goal was for learners to produce grammatically correct sentences, with little consideration of meaning and real-life context.

Another criticism of the audio-lingual method is that the drills did not offer any feedback on the learners' mistakes. Instead, learners were pushed to imitate the teacher's model without any opportunity to reflect or think critically. This stands in

stark contrast to cognitive approaches, where learners are encouraged to correct their own mistakes, if possible, because that will help them to learn where the mistake was so that they do not repeat it (Grade University, 2023). Furthermore, drills often involved stereotypical scenarios, as this example from Allen (1974) shows: You won't speak English well until you go to England, which in some way promoted cultural reductionism.

Coming up to the present, Task-Based Learning highlights the importance of communication, i.e., language learning is not about learning rules, vocabulary lists or sets of habits. In task-based instruction, the best way to learn a foreign language is by communicating it and through it. Therefore, teaching procedures involve the completion of tasks through speaking English. Task-based instruction is highly learner-centered and there is a shift away from accuracy to fluency; the important thing is for the learners to get their ideas across and mistakes are part of the learning process (Ur, 2018).

2. Drilling techniques

Going back to Audiolingualism and the assumption that language learning is habit-formation, drill work was a key feature of audio-lingual methodologies.

Basic drilling means listening to a model provided by the teacher and repeating what is heard, i.e., a repetitive oral practice of a particular target structure. At low-level proficiency, drills can be used for practising syllable stress, weak forms or consonant clusters which may cause difficulty. For example, when teaching the topic of food or even a grammar lesson:

- Teacher: VEgetable
- Learner: VEgetable
- Teacher: deVEloped
- Learner: deVEloped

However, we should see to it that drills are not too repetitive and tedious. There are numerous variations to repetition drills. BBC Leaning English (2017) suggests other types of drilling techniques:

- **substitution drills:** we change one word every time. These drills are interesting for practising different types of vocabulary
  - Teacher: I like milk
  - Learner: I like _____ (it)
  - Teacher: I like old English books
  - Learner: I like _____ (them)

- **transformation drills:** we change the person, the tense or make the utterance negative
  - Teacher: I often go abroad
  - Learner: I often go abroad

- Teacher: My best friend
- Learner: My best friend often goes broad
- Teacher: Simple past
- Learner: My best often went abroad
- Teacher: Negative
- Learner: My best friend didn't often go abroad

- **chaindrilling:** the teacher asks a question in a particular target structure to a student. That student responds and asks a question to the next student, who asks a question to the next student, etc.
  - Teacher: Have you visited to Germany?
  - Learner 1: Yes, I have / no, I haven't
  - Learner 1(to learner 2): Have you visited _____?
  - Learner 2: Yes, I have/ no, I haven't
  - Learner 2 (to learner 3): Have you visited_____? etc,.

- **split drilling:** the teacher separates a sentence across a number of students and get them to say one word each, or group them according to gender, or first row, then second row, etc. Students can be challenged to say the drill with perfect intonation.
  - Teacher: We love learning English, especially on Thursday mornings
  - boys: we
  - girls: love
  - boys: learning
  - girls: English
  - boys: especially
  - girls: on
  - boys: Thursday
  - girls: mornings
  - whole class: We love learning English, especially on Thursday mornings

- **backchaining:** start at the end of the sentence and gradually work your way back. This technique is effective for practising chunks of language, not just isolated words (Cameron and Besser, 2014), and the features of connected speech, such as vowel reductions, word linking or distinguishing function words from content words. Here is an example for drilling the third-type conditional *If I'd known you were coming, I'd have stayed at home*:
  - Teacher: at home
  - Class: at home
  - Teacher: stayed at home
  - Class: stayed at home
  - Class: I'd have stayed at home
  - Class: I'd have stayed at home

- **frontchaining:** after backchaining apply frontchaining. Start at the beginning of the sentence and move your way forward.
  - Teacher: If I'd known
  - Class: If I'd known
  - Teacher: If I'd known you were coming
  - Class: If I'd known you were coming
  - Teacher: If I'd known you were coming, I'd have stayed at home
  - Class: If I'd known you were coming, I'd have stayed at home

- **Visualising rhythm with nursery rhymes and Cuisenaire rods:** nursery rhymes are deeply entrenched in British folklore. They add a cultural dimension to the course. Learners are fond of them, including adults. They prove very useful for practising English rhythm, where stressed syllables establish the beat at regular intervals while unstressed syllables fit in between so as not to interrupt the flow of speech. Named after a Belgian primary school teacher, Cuisenaire rods are especially effective for visualising the metrical patterns of the rhymes. For example, in the *Grand Old Duke of York* (a reference to the War of the Roses), rods can be displayed to highlight sentence rhythm, using tall rods for stressed parts and short rods for unstressed ones:
  - He marched them up to the top of the hill and he marched them down again

After chanting the rhyme, choose phrases from the coursebook or snippets from conversations that will be helpful for the learners, and encourage them to practise using their own set of rods:

  - She's arrived

  - Where are you from?

  - They want to leave as soon as possible

3. Drill work and the Belgian educational framework

Recent research has brought to the fore the renewed importance of drilling in today's EFL classroom. Penston (2021) identifies the following reasons for using drills. Firstly, there is a need to focus on accuracy at certain stages of the lesson. Drills

provide immediate feedback on the learners' accuracy and many learners expect to be corrected.

Secondly, drills provide a safe environment for learners to experiment with the language. Those learners who like to repeat should be given the opportunity to do so. This also builds confidence among learners who are diffident about speaking in class. These learners may gain confidence on hearing their classmates and may eventually feel like joining in.

A third reason for using drills is that they strengthen the physical aspect of fluency. At low-proficiency levels, learners still need to get used to the sounds of English and they need to get the right muscles working properly. Learners need to be taught to feel the articulators involved until they can proceed to larger chunks of language in connected speech. Drill work consolidates the motor skill of articulation.

Fourthly, we really do learn iteration and this goes further than sheer mechanical repetition, so cognition *is* enhanced (Alali and Schmitt, 2012; Underhill, 2018). through repetition as practice, in the same way as children learn to speak their L1. Furthermore, research suggests that motor skills sharpen with every

The benefits of using drills are acknowledged in the foreign language curriculum in French-speaking Belgium. A specific section of the program focuses on incorporating phonological resources to enhance communication skills. It highlights the significance of "practising pronunciation and intonation exercises to help learners mimic and internalize foreign sounds. This can involve reciting the same lines with varying emotions, reading aloud the transcripts of audio materials, and even imitating foreign accents through playful, interactive activities and adjusting intonation patterns through" (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2020, pp. 56-57).

4. Moving from LOTs to HOTs

Drill work makes it possible for the learner to move from lower-order thinking skills (LOTs) to higher-order thinking skills (HOTs). This becomes apparent when we look at Bloom's taxonomy:

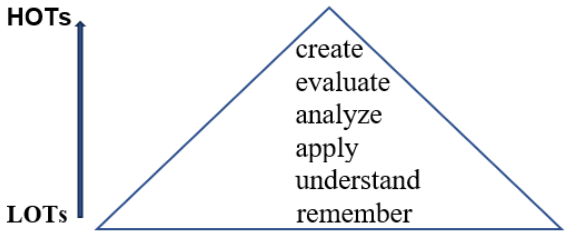

Figure 3. *Bloom's taxonomy (1956, revised in 2001)*

Bloom's taxonomy classifies cognitive skills and learning objectives by using verbs of action. Created by educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom in 1956, this model organizes six levels of thinking into a hierarchy, from the lowest to the highest levels. Learners need to achieve lower-order thinking at the bottom of the pyramid before they move on to higher-order thinking. Being able to remember and repeat the numbers in English, for example, could mean that you can prepare learners for telling time next. They need to have that foundation, i.e., the remembering and understanding stages, until they can apply that information to a new context and eventually get to the point where they can evaluate content and be creative with language use, without the teacher's scaffolding (Bridge Education group, 2022). Drill work provides that foundation by helping students to internalise grammar patterns and vocabulary. Once these building blocks are in place, learners can then focus on more complex language use and then go on to free expression.

Let us say that we are going to deal with the topic of climate change using a video. Here are some activities that we can incorporate in line with each thinking skill in Bloom's taxonomy:

1) Remembering
   Introduce words and phrases related to climate change using pictures. This way, students can easily recall the vocabulary and will be able to recognise these expressions in the video.
2) Understanding
   Students watch the video, and then the teacher can check understanding by asking comprehension questions.
3) Applying
   Students use the vocabulary to talk about climate change in their own country.
4) Analysing
   The class then explores the main factors, both major and minor, which contribute to climate change.
5) Evaluating
   Students engage in a discussion on ways to lessen the impact of climate change.
6) Creating
   Building on the previous task, students can write a proposal on how they can take impactful action to protect the environment in their local context and in their daily lives.

Bloom's taxonomy shows that one level is contained within the other. All levels build off each other. The top thinking level, creating, draws on all previous levels. Acquiring the ability to *process* information - rather than just gather it - is what we call higher-order thinking skills, but we should not ignore these lower order skills because they are the beginning of the learning process.

5. Meaning comes first

With the advent of the communicative approach in ELT, the focus shifted from sheer parrot-like repetition to meaningful interaction. Context should indeed be key in language learning (Penston, 2021). Monotonous chanting of decontextualised chunks of language should be avoided. For drills to be meaningful, learners need to understand what they are being asked to say. Creating meaning through viable context should guide us, EFL teachers, in everything we do in the classroom. It is therefore important to ask ourselves how to extend the drills, twist them and link them to meaning. Table 1 shows an example of how decontextualized drilling can be made meaningful, moving on a scale from unnatural, non-communicative practice to natural, communicative language production:

Table 1. *From non-communicative to communicative practice (based on Davies & Pearse, 2000).*

Non-communicative/ unnatural	Communicative/ natural
T: sweater- Norway- Jude Jude: The sweater was made in Norway T: Perfect. Smartphone-China- Helen Helen: The smartphone was made in China T: computer – The US - Paul Paul: The computer was made in the US	T: It's a beautiful sweater you're wearing, Jude. Check the label. Where was it made? Jude: It was made in Norway T: What about your smartphone, Helen? Helen: My smartphone was made in China, I think. T (to the whole class): Check the brand of your computer. Where was it made?

In the left column above, learners have no choice over what is being said. Drills here are a form of very controlled practice. There is one single answer and the main focus is on getting the grammatical item right. In contrast, the right column shows examples of meaningful drills. Students are encouraged to connect form, meaning and use because multiple responses are possible. They still respond to a prompt using the grammar under consideration, but learners can provide their own content of information.

Ur (2024) rightly argues that almost any grammar (or vocabulary) drill exercise can be turned into a simple oral interaction by opening it up to multiple responses. Table 2 shows this:

Table 2. *From non-communicative to communicative practice (based on Ur, 2024).*

1. Adverbs of frequency. Are these sentences correct? If not, correct them! >>	2. Controlled practice >>	3. Add meaning and interest >>	4. Free practice
I'm not usually going to school by bus. *Adam is often late.* *My friend is a vegetarian. Never he eats meat.*	*I don't usually go to school by bus.* *Adam is often late.* *My friend is a vegetarian. He never eats meat.*	*I don't usually ~~go to school by bus~~* *Adam is often ~~late~~* *My friend is ~~a vegetarian.~~* *He never ~~eats meat~~*	*I don't usually…* *Adam is often …* *My friend is ….* *He never ….*

The examples in column 1 are from Gateway to the World B1+ (Spenser, 2021). They are purely aimed at using the adverb of frequency. This is simply a standard grammar exercise, which is not for oral fluency. First time round, do it conventionally and practise the frequency adverbs as the textbook expects you to, and we come up with correct sentences (column 2). However, if we put the textbook aside, we can enhance the meaning and engagement by crossing out the last part of the sentence (column 3) and encourage students to complete it in their own way (column 4), turning the activity into a more interactive and stimulating challenge. Furthermore, the prompts in column 4 are suitable for all levels of proficiency.

6. Towards a holistic approach: no 'nevers' or 'alwayses'

As we have seen there is still a place for drilling in today's EFL classroom and it can easily be incorporated into all types of lessons. Drills make an insufficient, yet necessary step towards further, freer language practice, and with just a little tweaking, they can be made challenging and creative. Linking drilling to meaning and real-life communication also demonstrates the need for holistic teaching. As Thornbury (2019) puts it, there is no single best method, but there is good methodology and good methodology does not change. Indeed, there are no 'nevers' or 'alwayses' in ELT. Our teaching style may shift between being learner-centred or teacher-centred at various times during the lesson, but what truly counts is that our pedagogy in the classroom always fosters learning.

Thus, going back to the ELT pendulum, we should stop swinging from one extreme to the other. Maybe a better way is to use the best of what each methodology has to offer, based on what we believe helps students learn a language. This is when our judgment comes in as a teacher.

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