

The Structural Drill in Remedial Teaching

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Introduction

Many students in my first year degree classes come from English medium schools where they have studied all their subjects in English and yet at college their written work abounds with grammatical errors. At this stage the best solution to this problem is to isolate the most frequently occurring grammatical errors, then frame exercises and drill the students in the correct forms. Grammar teaching inevitably now becomes prescriptive.

Remedying Frequently Occuring Errors

The most frequently occurring grammatical error in the written work of my students is the error concerned with subject-verb agreement. Language teaching experts who emphasise fluency at the cost of accuracy assert that this error is insignificant because it is only a 'local' and 'surface problem' which will disappear in course of time. However, on the contrary, it has been observed in actual practice that this error persists for a very long time. At this stage, it becomes imperative to design effective materials and procedures that will correct the oft-repeated errors.

The structural drill would qualify as one such effective device. It is an 'ancient' method which is still popular with language teachers of all languages. Detailed taxonomic studies of structural drills by various experts clearly revealing the design features of the numerous types of drills are readily available. The teacher can easily choose one which will suit his purpose and classroom situation. An exercise using the structural drill can then be framed and later on it can be developed into interesting activities and games.

Using Structural Drills

A structural drill can be useful in remedying the frequently occurring error concerned with subject-verb agreement. The written data is from an essay entitled "College Life".

"I have a library card, an I.D. card and a bus pass. ***These three thing is very useful.**"

The following structural drill has been constructed to remedy this particular error. The exercise then progressively develops from 'controlled' to 'less controlled' to 'creative.'

	library card		
This	I.D. card	is	
These	bus pass	are	very useful.
	thing		
	two things		
	three things		

I. Controlled

The data is written on the blackboard. The error is highlighted by underlining it. The 'grammar rule' of subject-verb agreement is explained to the class. The substitution table is written on the blackboard. 'The three things' are obtained from the students themselves. The teacher holds up any one item and the students repeat individually or chorally: 'This thing is very useful'. When two or more items are held up they repeat : 'These two / three things are very useful'. This drill is repeated and practised till the students have

learnt the structure. This can be ascertained by orally testing the individual learner's response to the number of items being displayed. This drill can be made more interesting

1. by practising it with other items got from the students.
2. by splitting the class into groups and a student himself drilling his group.

For homework written exercises like "fill up the blanks with the correct form" can be given. The next day students can exchange their tasks and correct them in class.

II. Less Controlled

Complete the following :

1. An I.D. card is very useful for _____.
2. A bus pass and library card _____.
3. What other things are very useful for you?

Unlike the previous substitution drill this exercise is open ended, less predictable and more interesting. The student has to supply the information by himself. As the student has absorbed the structure, he is now given more freedom to use the structure to absorb more knowledge of its use by himself. He thus learns to correlate the structure with its meaning.

The exercise can be practised orally in class. Written exercises of a similar nature can be given as homework. The students can exchange their written tasks and do the corrections. The teacher has to emphasise accuracy even as he gives credit for content and expression.

III Creative

Write a short paragraph of about 100-150 words on '*Useful Things for College Students*'.

This exercise is ideal for pair work. Students question one another and exchange information. The information is noted down and lists are compiled. These lists can be exchanged with other pairs also. Only after a free discussion the students perform the written task.

The exercise has now become creative and communicative. Nevertheless the task is '*dependent*' on the two earlier exercises. In this task the student uses his knowledge of grammatical structures which he has acquired from the two earlier exercises. But more significantly there is an '*information gap*' and '*information transfer*' takes place. The students communicate freely and fluently as they exchange ideas. The students during their discussion may correct one another. They co-operate with one another and become less dependent on the teacher. But the teacher however is present and has to use correction positively to balance fluency with accuracy.

For homework the students can be asked to write a short paragraph on : '*Useful Things to Take When Going on an Excursion*' (100- 150 words).

After collecting the homework, a short passage can be composed by the teacher. This passage is made up of sentences from the homework of the students, in which half the sentences are correct and half contain errors. The correct and wrong sentences are jumbled and the dictation is given. This passage is dictated to the students at a slow and steady pace. The teacher reads the wrong sentences exactly the same way as he reads the correct ones. The task of the students is to correct the wrong sentences as they write the dictation. The teacher then asks the students to exchange their tasks. Corrections can be carried out as the teacher reads out the passage this time without the errors. The exercise is useful as it forces the students to decide quickly what is right and what is wrong.

Conclusion

Structural drills have an important role in remedial teaching. The important thing to remember is that a structural drill must be suitably modified to individual learners' needs and specific pedagogical contexts. Mechanical repetition should be restricted to a very short period of time and monotony can be circumvented by soon moving on to the less controlled exercises outlined above.

