

The Evidence is IN: Drills are OUT

Wynne Wong
The Ohio State University

Bill VanPatten
The University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract: *This article focuses on an aspect of traditional instruction — the form-only activities commonly called "drills," "mechanical practice," or "pattern practice." The authors first distinguish language as an internalized system from language as a productive skill and review the nature of mechanical practice. They contend that despite claims made about communicative language teaching and its goals, drills and form-only foreign language activities are still widely used in today's classrooms. After reviewing research on the utility of drills, the authors conclude that these activities are not necessary or beneficial for foreign language acquisition or the development of fluency and should be discarded from instructional practice*

Introduction

Ever since Krashen (1982) claimed that second language acquisition (SLA) was an implicit process unaffected by a focus on the formal features of language in the classroom, the profession has debated in some fashion or another the veracity of that claim (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Hammerly, 1987, 1991; Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Long, 1983; Schwartz, 1993; Zobl, 1992). The debate has been carried out in both second and foreign language circles and focuses principally on the role of grammar in a communicative language teaching context. (For a good overview of this discussion, see Lightbown & Spada, 1999, Chapter 6.)

The purpose of this article, rather than to examine this debate, is to evaluate the form-only activities commonly called "drills," "mechanical practice," and "pattern practice," by addressing the question, "Do drills contribute to language acquisition or improved performance over time?" In a sense we are continuing the discussion first launched by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993a, 1993b) that the question is not *whether* to focus on form but *how* to focus on form. Our position is that there is sufficient evidence to discard mechanical drills from instructional practice. Our evidence will come from both theory and empirical research.

We would like to make clear that, in our minds, not many of the points we present here are new. A number of them are traceable back to Krashen's claims in one form or another, although it will become clear later that we diverge from his position that a focus on form is neither necessary nor useful. Krashen's points in turn are traceable to others before the initiation of contemporary research on instructed SLA (e.g., Corder, 1967; von Humboldt). What is different is that we may now shift our perspective in language teaching to a more micro level of analysis. Rather than assuming that instruction in and of itself is not necessary or useful, we address the issue that perhaps it is *particular aspects of instruction* that are neither necessary nor useful.

Wynne Wong (PhD, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is Assistant Professor of French and Second Language Acquisition at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Bill VanPatten (PhD, University of Texas, Austin) is Professor of Spanish and Second Language Acquisition at The University of Illinois at Chicago, Illinois.