

The Value and Reasonable Limits of Behaviorist Drills in Modern Communicative Language Classes

Jing Wang

China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan 637002, China

ABSTRACT

Although behaviorist drills have been less used in language teaching since the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1980s, this paper suggests that they still have important educational value when applied under appropriate limits. It is believed that the main advantage of behaviorist drills is to improve the automaticity of language processing, thus freeing up the limited working memory of the learners for more important communicative activities. To facilitate the proper use of drills in modern English classes, three limit rules are put forward: drills should start from mechanical to meaningful, move from de-contextualized to contextualized, and adopt different kinds to prevent monotony. Finally, the paper indicates that in the post-method era, language teachers should regard drills as a means to achieve communication rather than the final goal of learning.

KEYWORDS

Behaviorist drills; Value; Limits.

1. INTRODUCTION

Behaviorist learning theory was developed in the beginning of the 20th century as one of the main schools of psychology. In its educational applications, the Audiolingual Method, which includes structural drills and memorized dialogues, has been important in giving students basic input for language learning^[1]. For several decades, this approach dominated foreign language classrooms across the globe, particularly in the United States and other English-speaking countries, where large-scale language training programs for military personnel and immigrants relied heavily on repetitive pattern practices.

Since the 1970s, the advancement of Communicative Language Teaching has affected the way of language instruction. The emphasis has shifted from “learning grammar rules” to “using language for practical communication”. The teaching steps have changed from routine practice to information-gap tasks, role-plays and activities for meaning negotiation. In this present educational background, the behaviorist drills, which were originally the major component of language teaching, have been ignored and at times criticized as “unreasonable”, “old-fashioned” or “theoretically incorrect”. Some radical advocates of communicative approaches have even suggested that any form of rote practice is inherently harmful to the development of creative language use.

It is necessary to admit that behaviorism, based on logical positivism, has some limitations. It mainly focuses on observable behaviors instead of considering the internal cognitive processes of learners. However, this research believes that the newly developed theories do not necessarily have to totally replace the previous dominant ones. They can rather focus on overcoming certain shortcomings, revising some methods and, when possible, keeping the compatible advantages from the earlier approaches. The purpose of this paper is to select the useful parts of the behaviorist theory and use

them reasonably in English teaching, with the intention of improving the present situation of foreign language education in China and increasing the students' comprehensive language ability^[2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will first sort out the development of behaviorist drills in language teaching, then explain the rise of Communicative Language Teaching and critiques of drills, and on this basis, clarify the reasonable positioning and application boundary of behaviorist drills in Modern Communicative Language Classes, so as to highlight the necessity and practical significance of this research.

2.1. Behaviorism and Its Pedagogical Applications

The origins of behaviorist drills can be found in B.F. Skinner's well-known research. Skinner proposed the theory of operant conditioning which states that learning happens through a sequence of "stimulus-response-reinforcement"^[3]. In Skinner's viewpoint, responses followed by positive reinforcement will become routine, whereas those followed by negative punishment will decrease gradually. When applied to the study of language, this idea regards the acquisition of language as the establishment of verbal habits, a continuous process of repetition and reinforcement, ultimately making correct language usage become instinctive and effortless. Skinner's work, though primarily conducted with animal subjects, was enthusiastically adopted by language educators who saw clear parallels between the conditioning of animal behavior and the shaping of human linguistic responses.

The Audiolingual Method is one of the principal teaching techniques based on the behaviorist theory. It was widely applied in American language teaching during the period from 1940s to 1960s, integrating behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics. According to this method, language is regarded as a group of connected parts and more emphasis is put on spoken language rather than its written form. In the classroom, the teaching procedure includes "drill", which consists of repetition, substitution, transformation and other kinds of pattern practices, all intended to establish correct language habits by means of systematic and strictly controlled exercises^[4].

A similar method, named Situational Language Teaching or the Oral Approach, was also established in Britain at the same period. It had the same behaviourist perspective on habit formation and emphasized oral practice, but the main difference was that it considered that new language structures should be presented and applied in real situations^[4]. These structures were not practiced individually, but were combined into daily situations, so that the learners could associate the linguistic forms with the contexts in which they were naturally used.

Both the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach regard structured drills as the core of language teaching, and had long dominated the global language teaching field until the cognitive revolution and the rise of Communicative Language Teaching.

2.2. The Rise of Communicative Language Teaching and Critiques of Drills

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the Audiolingual Method based on behaviorism was widely criticized. Chomsky argued that language could not be fully explained by the stimulus-response mechanism and stressed the creativity in using language^[5], because people often produced and understood new sentences which had never been encountered before, a fact which could not be explained solely by imitation and habituation. This criticism completely denied the behavioralistic view of language and shifted the focus of linguistic inquiry from external behavior to internal mental representations and rules. Hymes introduced the concept of communicative competence, suggesting that it was not enough to know how to form grammatically correct sentences; one should also know the proper occasions, places and recipients to use them^[6]. In other words, grammatical knowledge was necessary but insufficient; learners also needed sociolinguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge,

and strategic knowledge to function effectively in real communication. Later, Krashen proposed that communicative competence was mainly acquired rather than learned, and the learners needed the most “comprehensible input” instead of practice or correction^[7]. According to Krashen, drilling was only beneficial for conscious learning, which he regarded as unimportant for actual competence, and might even be disadvantageous as it could raise the “affective filter”. Krashen's monitor model had a powerful influence on classroom practice, leading many teachers to abandon drills in favor of extensive reading, listening activities, and meaning-focused interaction.

Because of these criticisms, drills were highly stigmatized in the communicative age, and the term came to represent all the faults of conventional language instruction.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) gradually replaced audiolingual and oral approaches, becoming the dominant paradigm in global foreign language education. CLT prioritizes the development of learners' communicative competence, emphasizing meaning expression, real interaction and autonomous meaning negotiation in the classroom. As the core technique of the traditional behaviorist teaching methods, structured drills have gradually been pushed to the edge of the classroom, and are generally labeled as outdated, mechanical and unhelpful for real communicative ability development. Many educators even completely exclude all forms of behaviorist drills from modern communicative language classrooms, arguing that they contradict the core idea of communicative teaching.

2.3. Reviewing Drills

Although there is a general opposition to drills in the communicative orthodoxy, recent studies in cognitive psychology and second language acquisition have reconsidered their significance. DeKeyser stated that the acquisition of complex skills goes through three stages: first, the declarative stage, where learners acquire basic knowledge consciously; second, the procedural stage, where this knowledge is formed into procedures by repeated practice; and third, the automatic stage, where performance becomes quick, easy and less dependent on conscious control^[8]. He believed that automaticity could not be obtained only by exposure or understanding, but needed much focused practice. If the underlying syntactic operations are not automatic, the learners will find it hard to pay attention to the structure of the sentence in real-time communication, for their working memory will be overloaded. They can focus on the meaning or the structure, but not both at the same time^[9].

Swain emphasized the significance of language production in the learning process^[10]. When learners are “stimulated” to produce correct and coherent language, they need to deal with the language more carefully, to discover the weaknesses in their language knowledge and to enhance their interlanguage. Drills provide such intensive and “stimulated” practice, which enables learners to repeatedly process specific linguistic forms, and consolidate the corresponding knowledge and skills in their interlanguage system.

Taken jointly, the above theoretical progress and empirical results indicate that the complete abandonment of drills might have been an early decision. Although the criticisms on mechanical and contextless drills are reasonable, they cannot deny the possible advantages of appropriate, context-related and timely drill practices. Therefore, what is required is a rational basis which determines the circumstances under which drills can play a beneficial part in language communication learning.

3. PROBLEM SOLUTION

The main issue now is a dualistic concept: drills and communication are considered to be two opposing methods. One using drills implies neglecting communication, and accepting communication means ignoring drills. This opposition is constantly emphasized in teacher training courses and other professional improvement activities by terms like “traditional vs. modern” and “behaviorist vs. constructivist”.

This paper re-evaluates the worth and appropriate boundaries of behaviorist drills in present day communicative classes and suggests the following three recommendations.

3.1. Progressing from Mechanical Drills to Meaningful Drills

Mechanical drills are defined by “repeated control”. The attention of the learners concentrates on the form, without paying much attention to the meaning. For instance, the whole-class singing of “This is a book” ten times is a typical example. The cognitive process involved in these drills is relatively simple, but they help the learners to repeat the basic form of the target structure in a relaxed situation, which is beneficial for the preparation of further practice. The difficulty does not originate from the mechanical drills themselves, but because if the lesson only stops at this point, the learners will not understand the relationship between the form and the meaning, and thus cannot apply the structure in actual communication. In other words, mechanical drills are not inherently bad; they are simply incomplete. They serve a specific purpose at a specific stage of learning, and their value lies in their ability to provide a low-anxiety, high-repetition environment where learners can establish a stable representation of the target form before moving on to more cognitively demanding activities.

Meaningful exercises are different from mechanical ones because the learners know what they are expressing when producing the form. The form and meaning appear together in the practice. That is to say, each sentence produced in the exercise contains particular information. The learners do not make meaningless sounds but use language to describe real or semi-real things. The advantage of meaningful exercises is that during the practice of forms, learners establish the relationship between form and meaning, which is a crucial step towards using language.

Then, how does the change from mechanical to meaningful drills occur? The teacher gradually modifies the meaning in the drill design. As an example, the progression of the past tense could be:

At first, mechanical drilling is carried out. The teacher introduces the basic forms of verbs, and the students easily form the past tense such as “go-went”, “eat-ate” and “see-saw”. The objective of this phase is to make the student’s answers to these forms quick and convenient.

Then follows a semi-mechanical stage. The teacher gives some phrases accompanied by time adverbs, and the students should construct complete sentences, such as “yesterday → I went to school yesterday” and “last night → She ate dinner last night”. The sentence structure is still definite, but they already possess some basic information in their sentences. The students have an overall understanding of what they are expressing.

Moving one step further is to carry out meaningful learning. The teacher presents several pictures, in which each one illustrates what a person had done the day before, and the students should select proper verbs and nouns according to the picture contents to describe them, such as “He went to the supermarket”, “She had a big breakfast”. At this point, the students have to understand the picture meanings and then choose suitable verbs and grammatical forms to express them where form and meaning are integrated.

The whole procedure is a continuous one where “control becomes looser and meaning enters step by step”. Mechanical drills consider the problem of “whether the mouth can open”, while meaningful drills examine “whether form and meaning can be combined”. The former deals with ability, and the latter deals with understanding. Both stages are necessary and the order cannot be changed. Mechanical drills prepare for meaningful drills, and meaningful drills base the more flexible language activities.

3.2. From De-contextualized to Contextualized Drills

The second boundary considers the effect of context. A major disadvantage of the traditional Audiolingual drills was their complete independence from any meaningful context. Students usually

repeated the pattern of using the “going to” future tense, for example, “I am going to eat”, “He is going to eat”, “We are going to eat”, but the persons concerned, the situations and the reasons for their going to eat were never pointed out. These exercises lead to an unsecured memory.

The injection of context into drills is necessary. Although the Situational Language Teaching tradition is sometimes ignored, its view on this issue is still worthwhile to refer to: language structures should be presented and trained in context, so that the learners can comprehend, within a certain situational background, the reason for using a particular form in a specific manner.

For instance, the teacher may begin with a simple situation: “This is Li Ming’s diary entry of yesterday. He had a very busy day. What did he do? Let us discuss it together.” Then, she gives some organized hints: “At 7 a.m., he ____ (wake up)”, “At 8 a.m., he ____ (have breakfast)”, “At 9 a.m., he ____ (go to school)”. Then the students fill in the past tense forms. The practice is still under control and focused on the structure, but it is included in a coherent story and the students can know the reason for using the past tense.

The same method can also be applied to more complicated grammatical forms: by using a situation of a job interview to practice conditionals (“If I were the manager, I would...”), using a scenario about health advice to practice modals (“If you have a headache, you should...”), and employing a news report context to practice the passive voice (“The building was destroyed in the earthquake”). The context serves as a significant support for the form, enabling the learners to understand in which situations and for which purposes a certain form is applicable. In each of these cases, the context is not a mere decoration added to the drill but an integral part of the learning activity, shaping the learners’ understanding of the form’s function and providing a mental schema that facilitates later retrieval and use.

3.3. Varying the Forms of Drills to Avoid Monotonous Repetition

The last two boundaries deal with the “content design” of the drills, namely the combination of form and meaning and the incorporation of context. However, there is another issue which is also very important but often ignored: the “form” of the drills themselves.

In daily teaching, teachers usually employ repetitive drill methods. The most frequent types are repetition drills or substitution drills, in which the pattern does not change throughout the whole process, only some words or sentences are modified. The difficulty is that if the same drill method is used for a long time, the students will easily feel tired and the interest in the content will decrease. They start to speak mechanically without thinking. At this stage, the efficiency of the drill has been greatly reduced.

There are various types of drill methods. The same grammatical structure can be practiced by chanting together, or by group rotation reading; by conversation between teacher and student, or by pair-work among students; by describing pictures, or by listening and filling in the gaps; by oral exercises, or by quick written gap-fill activities; by real communication to facilitate form production, or by games and contests to increase the sense of urgency. Each method influences the cognitive processes of the learners in different ways. Some stress imitation, others focus on understanding, still others on reaction speed and information processing. By changing the methods, the learners keep a “slight novelty” in their mind and their interest is more prominent compared to the continuous drilling with the same method.

The main point is not to have various formats merely for the sake of diversity, but that the aim of practice is “to enable students to meet and produce the same structure under different conditions”. As repetition is essential, each repetition should be “packaged” in a different way; otherwise, students may fall into the situation of “speaking but not thinking”. The teachers should pay attention to an ignored matter, that is although the content of the drills is important, the form of the drills should also be considered carefully in the design of instruction, instead of randomly selecting one form and

applying it consistently. A thoughtful teacher will plan a sequence of drill formats that progressively increase in cognitive demand, moving from choral repetition to individual response and from oral to written modalities, ensuring that the learners are consistently challenged and engaged throughout the practice session.

4. CONCLUSION

The importance of drills, when they are thought out correctly, resides in their effect on automating linguistic processing. In a cognitive model of skill learning, the way to achieve fluent and accurate performance must go through a stage of intensive and concentrated practice. By decreasing the mental load on form, drills allocate more resources for understanding and producing meaning. In fact, this is the way drills assist in communication not by substituting it, but by facilitating it.

Furthermore, this value is based on properly arranged and restricted practice sessions. In this document, three aspects have been discussed. Firstly, the practice should be improved from mechanical to meaningful, so that the students can concentrate on the semantic meanings of the practiced forms. Secondly, the practice should be carried out in context to allow the students to understand the communicative significance of the forms. Lastly, the forms of the practice should be changed to prevent monotony. Hence, these three aspects are suitable for the effective utilization of practice sessions in communicative classes.

The contradictory concepts in language teaching, such as audiolingual versus communicative, and form-focused versus meaning-focused, can now be considered as old classifications which do not fit the complicated classroom situations. What is important is not the name of a method but the effectiveness of the method in the specific situation, the objectives it achieves and the connection it has with the whole learning process.

The good teacher is not merely a “drills proponent” or a “communication proponent”, but one who can adjust freely between the form-meaning range, choosing and planning activities according to the requirements of different learners at certain times. Sometimes it may require a short and concentrated drill; at other times, an independent task. The ability to make such judgments based on educational knowledge, which is understanding when to use drills, when to advance, and when to allow communication to dominate, is one of the true signs of professional competence. Ultimately, the goal of language teaching is not to be faithful to any particular method but to facilitate learning in the most effective and efficient way possible.

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