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Директор ЧУДО ЛЦ «Кембридж»
Стадникова Е.А.

Teaching Tip #4

Teaching English with Minimal Resources

I. Tips and ideas for getting more from a coursebook by Miles Craven

Starter level

Speech bubbles: speaking

- For lower-level students, choose a picture in their coursebook (or magazines - choose famous stars) that has several people in and have them think about what each person is saying.
- This could be as simple as *What's your name?* or *How are you?* but encourage students to be as creative as they can.
- Give them time to think of their ideas, then tell them to write what they think each person is saying in a speech bubble on the picture.
- Finally, put students into groups to practise the conversations they have made.

Pictionary: speaking

This is a good game to review vocabulary that students have covered in class, such as household objects, animals, jobs, food, sports, etc.

- First, make a list of twelve or fifteen words that you want to review.
- Then draw a line down the middle of the board to split it into two sections.
- Divide the class into two teams and explain that one person from each team must come to the board and draw a word that you give them.
- Explain that the students in their team must correctly guess the word.
- When their teammates have correctly guessed the word, they should sit down and another person from their team should come to the board and draw the next word.
- Explain that they have to guess as many words as they can in the time available.
- The team with the most number of correct guesses at the end is the winner.
- Tell each team to elect one person to go first. Give them each a different word from your list to draw and begin the game!

Elementary level

Describe the picture: speaking

- Choose an interesting photograph or illustration from your course book and put students into pairs to describe what they can see. You might want students to concentrate on using a target structure you have recently covered. For example, an elementary class might review the present continuous by saying what each person in a picture is doing. *She is sitting on a chair/He is speaking on the phone*, etc.
- You could turn this into a game by putting students into groups of three or four and having one student ask a question (e.g. *What is she doing?/Who is speaking on the phone?* etc.) while the other students compete to be the first to answer. Students gets one point for each correct answer. The winner is the person at the end of the game with the most points.
- Alternatively, choose a picture that allows them to recycle the vocabulary they have covered in the class, such as clothes, adjectives appearance and character, etc. *He looks shy, I think she's very intelligent.*

Describe the picture: writing

- Provide for a focus on accuracy. Increased accuracy (along with increased fluency and complexity) is one of the ways in which a learner's language improves so there is a need to focus on accuracy at certain stages of the lesson or during certain task types.
- Provide learners with intensive practice in hearing and saying particular words or phrases. They can help learners get their tongues around difficult sounds or help them imitate intonation that may be rather different from that of their first language.
- Provide a safe environment for learners to experiment with producing the language. This may help build confidence particularly among learners who are not risk-takers.
- Help students notice the correct form or pronunciation of a word or phrase. Noticing or consciousness raising of language is an important stage in developing language competence.
- Provide an opportunity for learners to get immediate feedback on their accuracy in terms of teacher or peer correction. Many learners want to be corrected.
- Help memorisation and automatising of common language patterns and language chunks. This may be particularly true for aural learners.
- Meet student expectations i.e. They may think drilling is an essential feature of language classrooms.

For the teacher, drills can:

- Help in terms of classroom management, enabling us to vary the pace of the lesson or to get all learners involved.
- Help us recognise if new language is causing problems in terms of form or pronunciation.

What we should drill

At all levels we should drill vocabulary or chunks of language that cause pronunciation problems.

- At low levels students are still getting used to the sounds of English and need plenty of opportunity to get their tongues around them so it is likely that drilling will be used more.
 - Sounds that either do not exist in their L1 or occur differently.
 - Consonant clusters and weak forms may also cause difficulty - for example in words like vegetable, comfortable.
- At the phrase level intonation, stress, and weak forms often cause learner difficulties and at higher levels there may still be problems with these aspects of pronunciation. Phrases such as, 'If I'd known you were coming I'd have stayed at home' are difficult to say .
- Intonation patterns that are crucial to meaning may also be usefully practised through drilling, for example tag questions (which ask for confirmation or which are genuine questions) or expressions like You could have told me it was his birthday! (as a rebuke)

If we believe that drilling helps our learners memorise language, we should also drill useful and common language chunks to help them internalise them. This would include many common phrases such as,

- 'Hello, how are you?'

- 'Can I have a ..?'
- 'Have you got a ...'
- ' If I were you I'd.. '
- etc.

Drilling of structures per se seems much less likely to be useful because of the mental processing that is required to apply grammar rules accurately, particularly if it is a new piece of language for the learners.

When we should drill

For drills to be meaningful, learners need to understand what they are being asked to say. Monotonous chanting of decontextualised language is not useful to anyone.

- This means that work on the meaning of the language must come before drilling.
- Drilling can be comfortably and effectively incorporated into many types of lessons - whether you use a PPP model or a task based approach, for example.
- Drilling may follow a language focus stage particularly if you are dealing with spoken language. It may be too much, however, to expect learners to get it right immediately so you may want to introduce drilling later for remedial purposes. Or you may do it after a fluency task as a correction strategy.

It shouldn't be used too much however; if boredom sets in it is unlikely to be useful at all.

Now let's focus on **how we drill**. Here are some ideas for using drilling effectively in the classroom.

Repetition drills

When learners are getting used to the sounds of English it may be easier for them not to see the language written down before they practise saying it, so get them to listen to your model and then repeat.

- Make sure you give clear, natural sounding and consistent models.
- Use hand movements to indicate intonation, use your fist to beat the stress, and join or separate fingers to show word boundaries and where linking occurs in phrases. This kind of gesturing may in particular help visual learners since it helps them visualise the language they are practising.
- Back chaining helps learners focus on correct pronunciation and intonation and is also attention-grabbing. For example, when you are modelling a phrase, start at the end, getting the learners to repeat after each chunk you give them.
For example: yesterday / get up yesterday/ did you get up yesterday/ what time did you get up yesterday?

You can vary the drill in terms of who repeats - whole class, half the class, boys only, girls only, individuals. Make sure drilling is done at a snappy pace.

You can also try:

- Whisper drills (for quietening down a rowdy class)
 - Shouting drills (for livening them up)
- These ideas work particularly well with young learners.
Or you can liven drills up by saying things in different ways. For example, sound very happy, very sad, very bored, very excited with a facial expression to match

as you model the language and get the learners to do the same.
Putting expression into it and exaggerating the intonation helps make the language more memorable.

Guessing games

Simple guessing games which require lots of repetition of the target language are ideal for practising language items at low levels and are in fact a form of drill.

- After you have used pictures to introduce vocabulary or phrases stick the pictures on the board back to front so they can't be seen. Students try to guess which picture is which.
- Pick out one picture and don't show it. Students guess which one it is. If you're using real objects you can use the same principle by hiding the objects under a cloth or in a bag and getting them to guess which object you're holding.
- For practising '**Is it..?**' questions, classroom objects and describing location with children, hide a plastic spider somewhere in the room and get the children to guess where it is. 'Is it under the teacher's desk?', 'Is it behind Jose's chair?'

Disappearing text

This can be done with a list of vocabulary items or phrases, a short text or a dialogue at any level.

- Write up the text on the board. Read out the text and drill.
- Rub off a small part of it. Students have to say the whole text again.
- Gradually rub off more and more in bits and each time get the students to say the whole text.

This provides intensive drilling practice as the students have to repeat it so many times. However, the game factor also increases motivation to get it right and that gets more challenging as the activity continues.

Dialogue building

This is useful particularly for low level students to build confidence in speaking and to learn useful chunks of language. Use pictures to set a scene and elicit a dialogue.

Example:

- Have you got a pet?
- Yes, I've got a cat.
- Oh, what's its name?
- It's called Fred.

Drill each line as you elicit the dialogue.

Rather than writing the whole dialogue on the board as you go, you can just write one or two words to help them remember each line.

Example:

- Have/pet?
- Yes/
- /name?
- /Fred

- Then let the students choose different pets and make up similar dialogues in pairs. Aim for not more than eight lines or so in the dialogue or it may become difficult to memorise.

Mingle activities

With smaller classes, mingle activities work well and provide opportunities for lots of repetition of target language. A simple example of this for low level learners is '**Say and swap**'.

- Learners are given flashcards or small pictures of target vocabulary items or phrases.
- They mingle and swap their pictures but as they swap they have to say the word on the picture they have.
Alternatively this can be done as a more stationary chain drill: students pass the flashcards or pictures around the whole class and again say the word each time they pass it on.

- Another example is '**Find Someone Who**' which can be adapted to any level. Students have a list of people to find.

Example: Find someone who

- gets up before 7.00
- watches TV in the morning
- eats toast for breakfast etc.

Students go around asking the question. In this example the language practised is '**Do you...?**' and the topic daily routines. This activity generates lots of repetition of this pattern as well as providing opportunities for freer responses if the learners develop the conversation. In larger classes it can be done as a stationary group work activity.

Information gaps

Information gap activities are often designed to provide highly controlled practice of particular structures. By swapping information which requires use of a particular language pattern, the students have to solve a problem. This problem solving provides a communicative purpose to what is essentially a drill.

Example:

- The students have a shopping list of fruit they need to buy (6 oranges, 1 kilo of apples etc.)
- Student A has the prices of various fruits in one shop, student B has the prices in another shop.
- They have to ask each other and answer about the prices and complete a grid with the information.
- The task is then to decide which shop will be the cheaper one for them to buy their fruit in.

Songs, rhymes and chants

Many primary aged learners respond very well to songs, games and chants. These young learners can find it very difficult to remember how to say complete phrases in a foreign language when they are first learning, but they remember whole songs and chants with ease. Action songs like '**Head, shoulders, knees and toes**' provide fun drills of language for parts of the body. Or you can make up your own action songs by

putting target language to a well known tune and getting the children to do actions. For example, as you sing this to the tune of '*Frere Jacques*', do actions of putting on all the clothes mentioned :

- Shorts and T-shirt
Shorts and T-shirt
Shoes and socks
Shoes and socks
Jumper hat and trousers
Jumper hat and trousers
Skirt and dress
What a mess!

When accompanied by gestures and actions, songs and chants appeal to different learning styles such as aural and kinaesthetic. Older learners may be self conscious about singing but chants and raps can still work well and, once again, involve lots of repetition.

Conclusion

Drilling is not a new or a fashionable classroom technique, but, used appropriately in the classroom, it can be of great value to our learners.

- Only drill language that will benefit from being drilled (for example if it causes pronunciation problems or if it is a useful chunk of language to be memorised)
- Don't drill too much and keep drilling stages lively.
- Respond to your learners' needs - drill if you, or they, think it will help them pronounce or memorise words or language chunks.
- Vary the way in which you do drills to help make the language more memorable.