【Practice article】
"Repeat after Me"
A Model for Maximizing the Effectiveness of Drilling

David Barker

Faculty of Education, Gifu University

Abstract

This paper looks at the historical background and justification for the use of drilling activities in foreign language classrooms. It then focuses on the Japanese context and, based on the author's extensive experience of observing English classes in a range of educational institutions in Japan, looks at how drilling is generally done in Japanese schools and universities. The paper then discusses the role of drilling in language teaching in the modern era and outlines some of the problems that the author has observed. Finally, a set of guidelines is suggested in order to help teachers maximize the benefits of drilling activities in their classes.

Key words: drilling, drills, Audio-Lingual Method, repeat after me, pronunciation

Introduction

"Repeat after me" is a refrain that can be heard every day in English classes all over Japan. In every class I have ever observed, be it in elementary school, junior high school, high school, or even university, teachers model English words, phrases, and sentences (often from the textbook), and students listen and repeat. In many cases, this activity unfortunately seems to provide very little benefit for the students, and all too often, teachers find it difficult to explain exactly why they do it or what they hope it will achieve. Indeed, most struggle to provide any kind of explanation beyond the fact that "it's just something you do in English classes." In this paper, I will try to identify what I believe to be the main problems with Repeat-After-Me (RAM) activities in the Japanese context, and I will suggest a framework that teachers can follow in order to improve its efficacy.

A History of Drilling

In the field of English Language Teaching, Repeat-After-Me is generally known as "drilling" (Harmer, 2015). Although the idea of learning a language by mimicking a native or proficient speaker is probably as old as the idea of language learning itself, drilling took on a special significance with the rise in popularity of the Audio-Lingual Method. This Method was developed from the work of Fries (1945), a professor at the University of Michigan, which is why it also became known as the "Michigan Method" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Claims for a scientific basis for the Audio-Lingual Method were strengthened with the publication in 1957 of *Verbal Behavior*, a book by the psychologist B. F. Skinner. Skinner argued that the principle of "conditioning," the process of learning through stimulus-response association, could be also be applied to the study of foreign languages. The foundations of this concept dated back to Pavlov's discovery that dogs' salivation response could be triggered by any stimuli that the dogs were conditioned to associate with food (McLeod, 2013). Pavlov's work was extended in a paper by Watson (1913) that saw the beginning of the field of behaviorist psychology.

Skinner's claim that all human behaviors, including language, were learned through a process of stimulus and response fit well with the central methodology of the Audio-Lingual Method and provided scientific support for its central claims.

Drilling's Fall from Grace

The idea that language is nothing more than a set of acquired habits was heavily criticized by Chomsky in his review of *Verbal Behavior* (Chomsky, 1959). Chomsky argued that humans are not "blank slates" who can be trained through conditioning. He also claimed that language acquisition is more than simply a case of developing habits through imitation. The fact that children make errors like "the fish swimmed" showed, he argued, that for children at least, learning a language is a cognitive process, not a matter of simple mimicry (Pinker, 1994).

In addition to attacks on the scientific credibility of Audio-Lingualism, there were also many who questioned its effectiveness. Rivers (1964) suggested that a more traditional cognitive approach, where learners were taught about the grammar of the target language and provided with translations, was more likely to be effective. Evidence supporting this claim was later provided from the study known as the Pennsylvania Project (Valette, 2011).

Although drilling activities were not invented by the architects of the Audio-Lingual Method, they were so integral to it that when the method fell out of favor, use of the activity inevitably declined. RAM activities became even less popular with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, which argued strongly against any activity that was not seen as having a direct communicative goal (Nunan, 1987), a category into which RAM most certainly fell.

As Swan pointed out in his critique of Communicative Language Teaching (Swan, 1985 (1), 1985 (2)), one of the (possibly unintended) effects of CLT was therefore a strong move away from traditional activities like drilling that were deemed to be "uncommunicative." Swan famously denounced this as a case of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Another result in the rise of Communicative Teaching Methodologies was that in teacher training courses around the world, although drilling was not exactly removed from the curriculum, it came to be regarded as a kind of necessary evil that should only be used sparingly.

In recent years, drills have regained much of their popularity, although the primary claim of the Audio-Lingual Method that they enable students to learn a language through acquiring correct habits remains largely discredited. These days, most language teachers rely on RAM activities to give students an opportunity to practice target language structures (and particularly their pronunciation) in isolation so that the teacher can provide feedback on their performance. They are also seen as a way of giving students an opportunity to practice without the self-consciousness that inevitably comes with speaking in a foreign language.

Drilling in Japanese English Classes

Drills can take a number of forms, but the most commonly used variety in Japanese schools and universities is "repetition drills." These are drills where "Students are asked to repeat the teacher's model as accurately and as quickly as possible" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 47). Repetition drills can be divided into "choral" drills, where large groups of students repeat the target word or phrase together, and "individual" drills, where the teacher nominates specific students. Of these, choral drilling is by far the more common in Japan, at least in the lessons I have observed. The primary reason for this would appear to be the large class sizes and a worry on the part of the teachers that other students will get bored and lose interest in the class if the teacher chooses to focus on only one or two people. Although I would not question the usefulness of RAM activities per se, I have repeatedly noticed through my observations a number of issues that seriously detract from their effectiveness in English classes.

Problem 1: unclear aims
As mentioned above, RAM activities seem to be a kind of default activity for English teachers in Japan. Whenever I have asked teachers whether they have any specific aims for it, the response has generally been one of surprise that there would even be any need to think about this. In other words, it is such a standard activity that its inclusion in every lesson plan need not be questioned. The problem with this way of thinking is that without specific aims, it is not possible to judge the

efficacy of this (or any other) activity. I would argue, therefore, that teachers need to think more carefully about why they are doing RAM and what they hope to achieve from it.

Problem 2: poor teacher pronunciation

RAM activities can only have any real educational value, at least from a pronunciation standpoint, if the model provided by the teacher is both accurate and natural. Unfortunately, a serious lack of teacher training in this area means that many Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) are unable to provide models that meet these criteria. This is particularly problematic for younger learners who still retain the ability to hear and mimic the sounds of a foreign language. Although a strong argument can be made that in the era of English as an International Language, intelligibility rather than "perfect" pronunciation should be our primary goal (Jenkins, 2000), my experience of observing English classes in Japanese schools has been that all too often, the models provided do not even meet this criterion.

Problem 3: inappropriate materials

In many cases, teachers choose to use audio materials that come with the textbooks as models for their students. This is particularly common with dialogs in junior high school textbooks and reading passages in high school textbooks. Although these models are recorded by native speakers of the language, they inevitably have many of the features of natural connected speech removed in order to "make it easier for Japanese students to understand." The result is often very slow speech with a great deal of over-exaggeration of words and a lack of any word links. While this approach undoubtedly does make the English easier for Japanese students to understand, it greatly reduces the usefulness of the models for RAM activities. This is usually not a problem for teachers at the university level, who generally use well-made materials intended for an international market.

Problem 4: limited modeling

One problem that I notice constantly is that most teachers ask students to repeat the target language after providing the model only a single time. With such limited exposure, the majority of students are unlikely to be able even to remember what they heard, never mind repeat it. I believe, therefore, that there is a clear need for teachers to provide the model a sufficient number of times before they can expect the students to have any chance of repeating it accurately.

Problem 5: lack of individual drilling

As mentioned above, most RAM activities in English classes in Japanese schools tend to focus on choral repetition. Although this can be a good confidence builder, especially for weaker

students, it is of limited use for two reasons. The first is that with everyone speaking in unison, the teacher will not be able to hear what individual students are saying. The second problem is that when students become aware that the teacher cannot hear them, there is little motivation for them to attempt to repeat the model accurately, or even to bother trying to repeat it at all.

Problem 6: lack of feedback

The final problem I notice is that teachers rarely, if ever, give the students feedback on their performance beyond a general comment like "good" or "okay" at the end of the activity. If the students do not receive any feedback on whether what they are saying is accurate, there is little incentive for them to make a real effort, and the only aim that teachers can reasonably hope to achieve is to build students' confidence. Even with that goal, however, the potential for RAM activities will be severely limited if the students are not even trying to say the target language.

 To summarize, my experience would suggest that RAM exercises in Japan are all too often simply a waste of both the teachers' and the students' time. However, this need not be the case. If some basic principles and guidelines were followed, it would be relatively straightforward for teachers to increase the efficacy of this exercise enormously. In the following section, I will set out a framework for achieving this goal.

The FMF Framework for Effective Drilling

The FMF model is based on widely accepted principles of language teaching, and its simplicity is aimed at making it accessible to a wide range of teachers. The framework consists of three key components.

Focus

Any English utterance beyond a single syllable will involve a number of phonological components. These include sounds, stress, rhythm, intonation, and features of connected speech such as word linking and elision (Underhill, 2005). When all of these features are combined, the resulting sequence of sounds becomes very complex, and students are unlikely to notice the majority of the individual features.

 For this reason, teachers need to choose one or two key features of the utterance they wish students to repeat and draw the students' attention to these features overtly when they provide the model. These features might be individual sounds that the teacher thinks will be difficult for the students, such as "th," "l," or "r." Alternatively, the focus could be on features of connected speech such as word links, or it could be on the overall intonation or rhythm of the utterance. More important than the choice of focus is the act of selecting one. Having a focus

gives the students a clear goal to aim for and makes it clear to them what the teacher wants them to pay attention to when they repeat the target word, phrase, or sentence. It also makes it much easier for the teacher to give detailed feedback. Of course, teachers should strive to provide a balance over the course of a series of classes so that they do not focus exclusively on too limited a range of features, but as long as they identify one or two useful points each time, the actual selection itself is not crucial.

Modeling

When teachers provide models of English words, phrases, or sentences for students to imitate, care must be taken to ensure that the models are a) natural, b) consistent, and c) sufficient.

When modeling sentences in a foreign language, some teachers may be tempted to slow the language down or otherwise adjust it in such a way as to make it easier for their students to pronounce. Making these adjustments, however, does the students a disservice. This is because learning to pronounce a language in a way that is significantly different from the way it is pronounced by proficient speakers of that language is likely to have a detrimental effect on their listening ability. Even at lower levels (and younger ages), it is vital that learners are exposed to examples of the language that are both natural and authentic.

If a teacher is not confident in their own pronunciation, they should ask ALTs or more proficient colleagues to make recordings of the utterances they wish to model. If this is not possible for practical reasons, they should rely on recordings provided with the textbooks (although note the problem of unnatural materials in junior high school and high school text books discussed above). If neither of these options is available, the teacher should avoid RAM activities altogether, as not providing any model is preferable to providing models that are inaccurate.

If the target language structure is long or particularly difficult, it should be broken down into "chunks" to make it more manageable. If this is done, the teacher should begin from the end of the sentence and work back, a process known as "back drilling." The reason for that is that if you break a sentence down from the beginning, your voice will naturally fall as you reach the end of each segment, even if that is not actually the end of the sentence. Beginning from the end means that you maintain the natural intonation of the sentence even when you break it down.

Even if your models are both natural and authentic, they will be of limited use to the students if they are not consistent. For example, if you stress one word the first time you model the sentence and another the second time, students may be confused and unsure of which pattern they should imitate. To avoid this, make sure you have a clear image in your mind of how the sentence should be said before you start, and make a conscious effort to be consistent even when you model it numerous times.

The third thing to consider is whether you are providing sufficient input of the model for the students and giving them enough time to internalize it before you ask them to repeat it. Teachers need to remember that to students, sentences in a foreign language often seem to be like a kind of "sound salad" of random meaningless sounds. In general, most students will need to hear a model at least three times (and maybe more) before they will be able to imitate it accurately. They will also need sufficient time to practice using their "inner voice" (Tomlinson, 2000) in a kind of image training. A general rule is that if you cannot imagine yourself repeating a sentence in your head, you will not be able to produce it out loud.

One way to encourage students to use their inner voice is to leave a gap between the models that is the same length as the model itself. This will help students to judge whether they are able to repeat it at the required speed. If you provide the model three times with well-timed gaps and encourage students to "repeat" it silently in their heads, you will normally find that most are able to reproduce it with a much higher degree of accuracy after the fourth time. If three times does not appear to be sufficient, you should feel free to increase the number to five, seven, or however many times the students appear to need to hear it. An ex-colleague of mine once started to take classes in Thai, and when I asked her if that experience as a student had affected her own teaching in any way, she was effusive about one point in particular: "When I teach English, I worry that if I say something more than three times, the students will get bored. As a student, though, I often find that I need to hear it ten, twenty, or even thirty times before I can say it!"

Feedback

The final "F" of the FMF framework is feedback. There is little point in asking students to repeat something if you then fail to give them any feedback on how well they did. If you repeatedly fail to give feedback, students will begin to lose interest, and many will not even bother making an effort in the first place. In several of the classes I have observed, I was able to hear clearly from the back of the classroom that a number of the students were simply mumbling random sounds in an effort to fool the teacher into thinking that they were practicing. And in every case, their attempts worked!

Of course, it is not easy to give feedback when you are teaching a large class of thirty or forty students. For this reason, choral drilling must always be followed by individual drilling and personalized comments. Some teachers worry that the students will get bored if only one or two people are practicing. There are a two reasons why this is not the case. Firstly, the students do not know who the teacher is going to select, and simply knowing that someone is going to be chosen is likely to motivate them to take the choral practice more seriously. Secondly, all the students will be listening when the teacher gives feedback to an individual, and as all of the students share a first language, it is likely that the comments directed at one will apply to many of the others as

well. At the very least, giving individual feedback will help students to understand what the teacher is asking for, and it will encourage them to assess their own performance even when they do not receive feedback directly.

Other Basic Principles of Drilling

In addition to the FMF framework outlined above, there are a number of other principles that teachers should bear in mind when doing RAM activities.

The first of these is that we should aim to "drill by ear, not by eye." What this means is that if you drill a sentence, the students should not be reading it (either from their books or from the board) as they try to repeat it. English writing is not phonetic, and attempts to pronounce an English word, phrase, or sentence by looking at a written representation are doomed to failure. A particular problem is the phenomenon known as the "McGurk effect" (Nicholls, Searle, & Bradshaw, 2004), which describes how the brain prioritizes information obtained from the eyes over information gleaned by the ear and adjusts perception of the audio signal accordingly.

Another point to remember is that salient features of the target phrase should be exaggerated. As a rule of thumb, learners will undershoot the model provided by the teacher, so if you want them to pronounce an intonation pattern in a natural way, you will need to exaggerate it considerably in order to achieve that goal.

One final point worth considering is whether any language should be drilled before the students understand what it means. There are two schools of thought on this. The general consensus seems to be that having students repeat language that they don't understand is a somewhat pointless activity. Others argue, however, that a lack of understanding can actually be a bonus as it forces students to focus exclusively on the audio signal they perceive when they hear the model. Indeed, some successful language learners argue that pronunciation training should precede the learning of both grammar and vocabulary in the learning of a foreign language (Wyner, 2014).

Conclusion

There is now general agreement among ELT practitioners that RAM activities provide an excellent way to practice the sounds of a language. As Kelly (2000, p. 18) notes, "Drilling is an important tool in pronunciation work. Many teachers skimp on drilling because they feel that it is something that only needs to be done at lower levels, yet it is important at higher levels too." This is an important point, as there is a real danger that teachers of university classes might feel that

drilling is an inappropriate methodology at the tertiary level. This is clearly not the case, so it is important that university teachers' awareness of this issue be raised.

Even for teachers who do currently use RAM in their classes, there is, I believe, a serious need for a reassessment of the way it is implemented. Following the FMF framework outlined above and providing focus, appropriate modeling, and useful feedback can transform this activity from a pointless exercise where both teacher and students simply go through the motions into a useful and beneficial tool for developing language proficiency for students of all levels and ages.

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