

LESSON PLANNING | PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTION

Although the term '**practice**' is often associated to controlled practice activities found in presentation-practice-production types of lessons, it will be used in this handout to refer to **activities** which promote the **use** of language in more generic terms.

One of the most basic distinctions is between practice activities which promote language **accuracy** (i.e. the ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences) and activities which promote language **fluency** (i.e. the ability to produce continuous speech with intelligible grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that does not cause interruptions or communication breakdowns).

Consider the following characteristics.

Accuracy-focused activities	Fluency-focused activities
▪ Reflect classroom use of language ▪ Focus on the formation of correct examples of language ▪ Practice language out of context ▪ Practice small samples of language ▪ Do not require meaningful communication ▪ Control choice of language	▪ Reflect natural use of language ▪ Focus on achieving communication ▪ Require meaningful use of language ▪ Require the use of communication strategies ▪ Produce language that may not be predictable ▪ Seek to link language use to context

Richards (2006: 14)

A similar distinction is made in relation to the **communicative** aspects of these activities.

Non-communicative activities	Communicative activities
▪ No communicative desire ▪ No communicative purpose ▪ Form not content ▪ One language item only ▪ Teacher intervention ▪ Materials control	▪ A desire to communicate ▪ A communicative purpose ▪ Content not form ▪ Variety of language ▪ No teacher intervention ▪ No materials control

Harmer (2007: 70)

Another important distinction is made in relation to the **type** of practice these activities provide.

Mechanical practice	Meaningful practice	Communicative practice
▪ Refers to a controlled practice activity which students can successfully carry out without necessarily understanding the language they are using.	▪ Refers to an activity where language control is still provided but where students are required to make meaningful choices when carrying out practice.	▪ Refers to activities where practice in using language within a real communicative context is the focus, where real information is exchanged, and where the language used is not totally predictable.

Richards (2006: 16)

Although the **goal** of approaches to language teaching focused on developing **communicative competence** can be said to promote **fluency** within **authentic contexts** where **real communication** takes place, the reality is that practice activities in the language classroom tend to **swing** along a line that connects the extremes described above. This means that in a typical lesson it's common to see both accuracy and fluency activities, which are more or less communicative, and promote mechanical, meaningful or communicative practice.

PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

The following are examples of the different kinds of activities described in the previous section with a brief evaluation. The examples use grammar (*Past Simple*) as the target language.

1. Fill the gaps using the Past Simple of the verb given. a. Last year, I _____ (go) on holiday to Milan. b. I _____ (travel) by train. c. I _____ (stay) in a small hotel. d. I _____ (eat) local food.	This type of activities can be said to be fully focused on ACCURACY as there is strict language control, and to be NON-COMMUNICATIVE as there is no real desire or purpose to communicate. They provide MECHANICAL practice as learners just need to change the form of the verb given. However, if the vocabulary in the sentences is contextualized, it can be noticed and provide some lexical input.
2. Write 5 sentences about your last holiday using the Past Simple. a. _____ b. _____ c. _____ d. _____	This type of activities can be said to be focused on ACCURACY and to be SEMI-COMMUNICATIVE. Although there is language control (<i>Past Simple</i>), learners can write about themselves and there would be focus on content (i.e. ideas) too. There is no real communicative purpose, but there could be a wider variety of language used. They provide MEANINGFUL practice.
3. Share your sentences with your classmates. Ask each other follow-up questions. E.g. <i>Last summer, I went on holiday to Thailand. Where exactly did you go? I went to Barcelona. Etc.</i>	This type of activities can be said to be focused on FLUENCY and to be more COMMUNICATIVE, thus providing more COMMUNICATIVE practice. Learners would have a stronger desire and purpose to communicate (i.e. to find out about each other's holidays) and language would not be totally predictable.

Although the activities presented above seem to suggest a particular **order** in which practice should be sequenced, this is by **no means true**. Teachers may deliberately choose to start by focusing on **accuracy** to provide some **scaffolding** for follow up **fluency** practice, or they may choose to start with a **fluency** activity and then focus on **accuracy** to address **emerging language needs**. Sometimes, an entire lesson can be focused on accuracy whereas another can exclusively promote fluency. Activity types and sequences are generally selected according to lesson **aims** and **learner needs**.

Activities in which **meaningful communication** between two or more **people** takes place and where **real information** is exchanged are generally believed to better reflect communication in **real life** and provide higher levels of **motivation**. Also, activities in which learners are focused on achieving a **specific outcome** can offer greater **incentives** to use the language.

The following are examples of such activities. Like before, activities target grammar (*Past Simple*).

1. Take turns in using the Past Simple of the following verbs to make sentences about your last holiday. Some sentences must be true and others must be false. Your classmates must ask follow up questions and guess if the sentences are true or false, and explain why.

GO	TRAVEL	VISIT	STAY	EAT
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2. Go around the class and ask at least 4 classmates about their last holiday. You can use the topics suggested and add anything you like. Record information on the table below. Once you have finished, share your findings with the person sitting next to you and decide who had the most interesting holiday and why.

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Destination				
Activities				
People				

This type of activities can be said to be focused on **ACCURACY** as there is strict language control (i.e. Past Simple – the verb given). It can be said to be **SEMI-COMMUNICATIVE** and provide **MEANINGFUL** practice: there is purpose to communicate and sentences must pay attention to both content and form. The activity is focused on a specific **OUTCOME** (i.e. making others guess whether sentences are true or false) and can therefore offer a greater **INCENTIVE** to practice.

This type of activities can be said to be focused on **FLUENCY** and to be more **COMMUNICATIVE**, thus providing more **COMMUNICATIVE** practice. There is no language control and real information is exchanged. The activity has purpose (i.e. recording information to find out about each other's holidays) and it's focused on a specific **OUTCOME** (i.e. deciding who had the most interesting holiday). The activity offers a greater **INCENTIVE** to communicate.

As you may have noticed, the last two examples promote a kind of language practice which is **not limited** to practicing **isolated** language forms (e.g. Past Simple) for their **own sake**, but encourage more **purposeful** language use where information, opinions, etc. are exchanged in order to achieve a particular **outcome** and where learners have to rely on a wider range of **language devices** (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, expressions, communication strategies, etc.).

Teachers often promote this kind of language use by taking advantage of '**information-gap**' activities where there is transfer of given information from one person to another, like it usually happens in real life. The following is an example.

A role-play in which the class is divided into 'students A' playing the role of hotel receptionists and 'students B' playing the prospective guests. The receptionists are given different role-play cards with different information about their hotel rooms, prices, amenities, etc. The guests are given role play cards with specific requirements about their rooms, prices, amenities, etc. The guests have to speak to as many receptionists as possible to collect information and find the hotel that best meets their requirements. The receptionists have to do their best to sell their rooms. Students role-play without looking at each other's cards, but engage in meaningful and spontaneous communication to achieve their objectives.

The following are other popular activity types that promote such language use and practice.

- **Task-completion activities:** puzzles, games, map-reading, and other kinds of classroom tasks in which the focus is on using one's language resources to complete a task.
- **Information-gathering activities:** student-conducted surveys, interviews, and searches in which students are required to use their linguistic resources to collect information.
- **Opinion-sharing activities:** activities in which students compare values, opinions, or beliefs, such as a ranking task in which students list six qualities in order of importance that they might consider in choosing a date or spouse.
- **Information-transfer activities:** these require learners to take information that is presented in one form, and represent it in a different form. For example, they may read instructions on how to get from A to B, and then draw a map showing the sequence, or they may read information about a subject and then represent it as a graph.
- **Reasoning-gap activities:** these involve deriving some new information from given information through the process of inference, practical reasoning, etc. For example, working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables.
- **Role plays:** activities in which students are assigned roles and improvise a scene or exchange based on given information or clues.

Richards (2006: 19–20)

For an additional list of activities which promote meaningful communication, please refer to the following handout:

- **Communicative task types**

References

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching, Fourth Edition*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman.
 Richards, J.C. (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. New York: Cambridge University Press.