

## Drills: Pros and Cons

*Why do students make mistakes?* A commonsense answer to this question is “Because they need more practice!” This makes intuitive sense, but *what should that practice involve?* This is a controversial question. In this activity we will take a critical look at one of the most common forms of practice, the grammar drill and answer the following questions.

- *What is a drill?* Repetitive structures that can be applied in different exercises, like fill in the blank or reorder the structure.
- *What are its characteristics?* Complete and correct the same structure.
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of drills as a grammar activity type?* It gives students flexibility to apply the language in different ways and contexts. However, if applied too much it could be boring. It targets only one way of learning.

**Drills:** Drills are a kind of practice exercise that involve restricted output rather than fluent communication. They are designed to cause students to produce specific examples of a grammar structure correctly. The focus therefore is on accuracy, or “getting it right”. There is always a “correct” answer and drills also involve lots of repetition of the target structure. Depending on the design of the drill, students can often respond correctly without having to understand what the structures mean.

- *Mention one or two common types of drills that you have used as a teacher or student or that commonly appear in textbooks and worksheets.*
- **Fill in the blank**
- **Correct the sentences**
- **Rearrange the sentences**
- **Matching**
- *In the space below, write a short grammar practice drill meant to help students practice possessive adjectives and pronouns (my/mine, your/yours, etc.)*

1. **Fill in the blanks where it has both possessive and adjective pronouns**
2. **Match the possessive with the adjective**
3. **Sentences where you have to circle the possessive and the adjective**
4. **Matching the possessive and adjective to pictures of the pronouns (for example: her and a picture of a woman)**

**Do Drills Work?:** Consider the following quotes then complete the chart outlining what you think are the pros and cons of using drills for grammar practice.

- “There is some discussion of the place of explicit grammar practice in the form of drills or exercises. Again, this is something that most teachers and coursebooks provide, and that students expect. But all experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon that students continue to make mistakes in the target grammar even after extensive practice. So practice does not necessarily make perfect. Should it therefore be abandoned (Ur, 2012, p. 79)?”
- “...there is evidence that practice does substantially improve performance and has an important place in formal, course-based language learning... We need to abandon the exaggerated claim that ‘practice makes perfect’ and content ourselves with the expectation that practice, like explanations of rules, can

make a significant contribution to good learning and is therefore worth including in our teaching (Ur, 2012, p. 79).”

- “Drills are often associated with the largely discredited behaviorist philosophy which suggests that we can be trained into automatic responses to stimuli through repetition or restricted response drills... We can still argue that our brains need to automatise tasks without having to buy the entire stimulus-response philosophy. It seems reasonably clear from day-to-day experience that we become better at doing certain things through practice (Scrivener, 2005, p. 255).”

Strengths of Drills	Challenges of Drills
	But all experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon that students continue to make mistakes in the target grammar even after extensive practice.