PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

From controlled practice to communicative tasks

Introduction

The term *practice* is often associated with the controlled activities in presentation–practice–production (PPP) lessons. In this handout, it is used more broadly to mean any activity that gets learners using language.

One of the most basic distinctions is between activities that promote **accuracy** (the ability to produce correct language) and activities that promote **fluency** (the ability to produce language smoothly and continuously, with intelligible grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and without communication breaking down).

The examples in this handout use grammar (the past simple) as the target language, but the same principles apply to vocabulary, functions and skills.

The continuum

Accuracy and fluency activities have different characteristics.

Accuracy-focused activities	Fluency-focused activities
reflect classroom use of language	reflect natural use of language
focus on forming correct examples of language	focus on achieving communication
practise language out of context	require meaningful use of language
practise small samples of language	require the use of communication strategies
control the choice of language	link language use to context

Adapted from Richards (2006: 14)

A similar distinction relates to how communicative an activity is.

Non-communicative activities	Communicative activities
no desire to communicate	a desire to communicate
no communicative purpose	a communicative purpose
focus on form, not content	focus on content, not form
one language item only	a variety of language
teacher intervention	little or no teacher intervention
materials control	little or no materials control

Adapted from Harmer (2007: 70)

Many activities fall between these two extremes. They are often called **semi-communicative**: there is some purpose to communicate and some attention to content, but the language is still controlled.

A third distinction relates to the type of practice an activity provides.

Mechanical practice	Meaningful practice	Communicative practice
controlled practice that learners can complete successfully without necessarily understanding the language they are using	practice in which the language is still controlled, but learners have to make meaningful choices	practice in which learners use language in a real communicative context, exchange real information, and the language is not totally predictable

Adapted from Richards (2006: 16)

Communicative approaches aim to promote fluency in authentic contexts where real communication takes place. In practice, however, classroom activities lie along a continuum between these extremes. A typical lesson often includes both accuracy and fluency activities, which are more or less communicative and provide mechanical, meaningful or communicative practice.

TEACHING TIP

None of these distinctions makes one kind of activity better than another. Accuracy-focused, controlled activities give learners scaffolding and confidence, while fluency-focused, communicative ones give them chances to use language for real purposes. Choose according to your lesson aims and your learners' needs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In this handout, practice means any activity that gets learners using language.
- Activities can be described as accuracy- or fluency-focused, non-communicative or communicative, and as providing mechanical, meaningful or communicative practice.
- Most classroom activities fall somewhere between the extremes, and most lessons include a mix.

Examples

The activities below all target the past simple and share the same topic: a past holiday. They are ordered from the most controlled to the most communicative, to show how the same language point can move along the continuum.

Activity 1 · Gap-fill

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Accuracy	Non-communicative	Mechanical

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Complete the sentences with the past simple of the verbs in brackets.

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.

Comment: There is strict language control and no real purpose to communicate. Learners only change the form of the verb. If the sentences are contextualised, learners may also notice some vocabulary.

Activity 2 · Sentence writing

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Accuracy	Semi-communicative	Meaningful

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Write five sentences about your last holiday using the past simple.

a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____
e. _____

Comment: The language is controlled (the past simple), but learners write about themselves, so content matters too. There is no real communicative purpose, but a wider variety of language is possible.

Activity 3 · True or false?

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Mainly accuracy, with some fluency	Semi-communicative	Meaningful

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Take turns to make sentences about your last holiday with the past simple of these verbs. Some sentences must be true and some false. Your classmates ask follow-up questions, guess whether each sentence is true or false, and explain why.

go · travel · visit · stay · eat

Comment: The language is controlled (the past simple, with the verbs given), but there is a purpose to communicate, and learners must pay attention to both content and form. The specific outcome (making others guess) gives learners a reason to practise, and the follow-up questions add some fluency.

Activity 4 · Sharing holiday experiences

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Fluency	Communicative	Communicative

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Tell your partner about your last holiday. Ask follow-up questions to find out more.

A: Last summer, I went on holiday to Thailand.

B: Oh, nice! Where exactly did you go?

A: First Bangkok, and then the islands in the south.

B: ...

Comment: Learners have a stronger desire and purpose to communicate (to find out about each other's holidays), and the language is not totally predictable.

Activity 5 · Holiday survey

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Fluency	Communicative	Communicative

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Ask at least four classmates about their last holiday. Use the topics in the table and add your own. Note down the information. Then share your findings with the person next to you and decide who had the most interesting holiday, and why.

	Name:	Name:	Name:	Name:
Destination				
Activities				
People				

Comment: There is no language control, and real information is exchanged. The activity has a purpose (collecting information) and a specific outcome (deciding who had the most interesting holiday), both of which give learners a reason to communicate. The past simple is likely to be used, but it isn't guaranteed.

Activity 6 · Hotel complaint role-play (information gap)

Focus	Communicative level	Type of practice
Fluency	Communicative	Communicative

LEARNER WORKSHEET

Student A is a hotel guest who stayed at a hotel last week and had a bad experience. **Student B** is the hotel manager, who was away that week and knows nothing about it.

Each guest has a card with details of what happened (e.g. arrival time, problems with the room, noise at night, a conversation with the receptionist, a missing item). Each manager has a card with the hotel's compensation policy and a limited budget.

The manager interviews the guest to find out exactly what happened, and the guest explains and tries to get the best compensation. Together, they agree on what the hotel will offer. Don't look at each other's cards.

Comment: Each learner has information the other lacks, so there is a genuine need to communicate. The outcome (agreeing on compensation) is specific. The situation involves narrating past events, so the past simple is very likely to be used, but it isn't guaranteed.

> Activities 4 to 6 go beyond practising isolated forms for their own sake. Learners exchange information and opinions to achieve an outcome, and draw on a wider range of language: grammar, vocabulary, expressions and communication strategies.

Information-gap activities

Teachers often promote this kind of language use through **information-gap activities**, in which each learner has information that others don't, as in real life, and information must be exchanged to complete the task. Activity 6 is an example.

Because the language isn't controlled, the target language may or may not be used. Keep this in mind when an information gap is part of a grammar lesson.

Sequencing

The order of the activities above isn't a fixed sequence. You may start with accuracy to give learners scaffolding for fluency practice, or start with fluency and then focus on accuracy to address the language needs that come up. One lesson can focus entirely on accuracy and another entirely on fluency. Choose activities and sequences according to your lesson aims and your learners' needs.

Activities in which two or more people exchange real information are generally believed to reflect real-life communication better and to be more motivating. A specific outcome also gives learners more reason to use the language.

From practice to task

Consider one more activity on the same topic.

> **LEARNER WORKSHEET**
>
> In pairs, decide which of your holidays you would recommend to a friend with a limited budget. Compare what you each did, spent and enjoyed, and agree on one recommendation to present to the class.

Learners will probably use the past simple, but nothing requires it. The focus is on reaching an outcome, and learners rely on their own language resources. This is no longer practice of a pre-selected form: it is a **communicative task**, the subject of the next section.

> **TEACHING TIP**
>
> When you design or adapt an activity, ask yourself where it sits on the continuum and whether that is where you want it. Small changes can move an activity: adding a personal choice, an information gap or a specific outcome makes a controlled activity more meaningful and more communicative.

> **KEY TAKEAWAYS**
>
> - The same language point can be practised in activities at very different points on the continuum.
> - Giving learners a purpose, real information to exchange or a specific outcome makes practice more communicative and more motivating.
> - Communicative activities don't guarantee that the target language will be used.
> - Accuracy and fluency activities can be sequenced in either order, according to aims and learner needs.

Communicative tasks

A **task** is a classroom activity that focuses on communicating meaning to achieve an outcome. The outcome may be to reach a consensus, solve a problem, draft a plan, design something or persuade someone. Practising a pre-selected language item (such as the present perfect) for its own sake is not a valid task objective. During a task, learners use their own language resources.

In theory, tasks can be receptive or productive, and can be done individually, in pairs or in groups. In practice, most activities called *tasks* in coursebooks involve production (speaking, writing or both) and interaction between learners, and this is the focus of this section.

Task criteria

A purposeful task has the following features. Use the questions as a checklist when you design or adapt an activity.

Criterion	Ask yourself
Authentic	Does it reflect a real-life situation?
Focused on a specific outcome	Does it have a clear, specific objective?
Generative	Does it create the need to produce language?
Challenging	Does it offer a suitable level of intellectual and linguistic challenge?
Interactive	Does it actively involve speakers and listeners (or writers and readers)?
Spontaneous and unpredictable	Does it include communication problems, conflicts or unexpected events?
Flexible	Is it simple to set up? Does it allow repetition?

Adapted from Thornbury (2006: 222–223)

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Use the criteria to turn a practice activity into a task. Adding a specific outcome (deciding whose holiday was more fun), an information gap or a limited budget makes it more purposeful, more interactive and less predictable.

Task types

This table groups tasks by what learners do with the content. The sample tasks show what each type can look like in the classroom.

Category	Task type	Sample task
Listing	**Brainstorming, fact-finding**	In groups, make a list of places in a city and what they are used for.
Ordering and sorting	**Sequencing**	Put the events of a news report in chronological order and compare your order with another pair.
	Ranking	Rank common technology tools in order of usefulness and agree on a group ranking.

Category	Task type	Sample task
	Categorising	Sort the items into the categories given and compare your results with another group.
	Classifying	Group a set of jobs in any way you choose and explain your groups to another pair.
Comparing	**Matching**	Listen to a description of a place, choose the matching picture and check your choice with a partner.
	Finding similarities	Read a text about food habits in Japan and compare them with those in your country.
	Finding differences	Describe your picture to a partner, without showing it, and find the differences between your pictures.
Problem solving	**Puzzles, logic problems**	A farmer needs to cross a river with a wolf, a goat and a cabbage. How can he do it?
	Real-life, personal or hypothetical problems	Plan a party for your friends on a limited budget.
	Incomplete texts or stories	Look at a set of pictures and work out the story.
	Case studies	Decide on the best way to reduce traffic in your city, using the solutions and statistics provided.
Sharing personal experiences	**Anecdotes**	Tell a partner about an embarrassing incident that happened to you or someone you know.
	Reminiscences	Tell your group about three things from the past that you regret.
	Attitudes, opinions, preferences	Talk about your favourite places to shop for clothes and find classmates with similar preferences.
	Reactions	Ask your classmates what makes them stressed and compare your answers.
Creative tasks	**Experiments and tests**	Carry out an experiment or test and report your findings.
	Creative writing	Write a short story based on something you have read.
	Investigations	Visit the local tourist office, find out about local tourism opportunities and report back.
	Media projects	Design and write or record an advert for a product of your choice.
	Real-life rehearsals	Script and perform a job interview.

Adapted from Willis (1996)

The categories overlap. A task often combines types: a case study, for example, may involve listing, ranking and problem solving. Creative tasks, or projects, usually combine several types over more than one stage and often lead to a finished product, such as an advert, a report or a performance.

TEACHING TIP

Check that a task asks learners to do something with the content, not just understand it. Completing a chart from a text or matching a description to a picture is only a comprehension exercise unless learners also compare, exchange or agree on something. Adding a pair or group stage with a shared outcome turns it into a task.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A task focuses on communicating meaning to achieve an outcome, and learners use their own language resources.
- The criteria (authentic, specific outcome, generative, challenging, interactive, unpredictable, flexible) can be used to design or evaluate a task.
- Tasks can be grouped by what learners do with the content: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks.
- A task doesn't guarantee that a particular language item will be used. It gives learners a reason to use whatever language they need.

References

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