

The End Justifies the Means: Using Programmed Mastery Drill to Teach Spoken English to Spanish Youngsters, without Relying on Homework

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Abstract : Most current language courses expect students to be 'vocational', sacrificing their free time in order to learn. However, pupils with a full-time job, or bringing up children, hardly have a spare moment. Others just need the language as a tool or a qualification, as if it were book-keeping or a driving license. Then there are children in unstructured families whose stressful life makes private study almost impossible. And the countless parents whose evenings and weekends have become a nightmare, trying to get the children to do their homework. There are many arguments against homework being a necessity (rather than an optional extra for more ambitious or dedicated students), making a clear case for teaching methods which facilitate full learning of the key content within the classroom. A methodology which could be described as Programmed Mastery Learning has been used at Fluency Language Academy (Spain) since 1992, to teach English to over 4000 pupils yearly, with a staff of around 100 teachers, barely requiring homework. The course is structured according to the tenets of Programmed Learning: small manageable teaching steps, immediate feedback, and constant successful activity. For the Mastery component (not stopping until everyone has learned), the memorisation and practice are entrusted to flashcard-based drilling in the classroom, leading all students to progress together and develop a permanently growing knowledge base. Vocabulary and expressions are memorised using flashcards as stimuli, obliging the brain to constantly recover words from the long-term memory and converting them into reflex knowledge, before they are deployed in sentence building. The use of grammar rules is practised with 'cue' flashcards: the brain refers consciously to the grammar rule each time it produces a phrase until it comes easily. This automation of lexicon and correct grammar use greatly facilitates all other language and conversational activities. The full B2 course consists of 48 units each of which takes a class an average of 17,5 hours to complete, allowing the vast majority of students to reach B2 level in 840 class hours, which is corroborated by an 85% pass-rate in the Cambridge University B2 exam (First Certificate). In the past, studying for qualifications was just one of many different options open to young people. Nowadays, youngsters need to stay at school and obtain qualifications in order to get any kind of job. There are many students in our classes who have little intrinsic interest in what they are studying; they just need the certificate. In these circumstances and with increasing government pressure to minimise failure, teachers can no longer think 'If they don't study, and fail, its their problem'. It is now becoming the teacher's problem. Teachers are ever more in need of methods which make their pupils successful learners; this means assuring learning in the classroom. Furthermore, homework is arguably the main divider between successful middle-class schoolchildren and failing working-class children who drop out: if everything important is learned at school, the latter will have a much better chance, favouring inclusiveness in the language classroom.

Keywords : flashcard drilling, fluency method, mastery learning, programmed learning, teaching English as a foreign language

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