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WINDOW OF PRACTICE – PRAXISFENSTER

Loops

A multi-purpose drama technique for the language classroom

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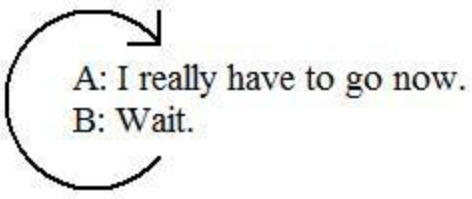
Our first *Window of Practice* contribution introduces a simple and effective language teaching technique called *loops,* which was developed as a part of the *act and speak*® method at Jeviste, a language school in Prague that specializes in using drama and theatre in language teaching. Loops allow for an intensive, focused, and engaging practice of narrowly selected language points, and they provide an easy start for improvisation and creative writing activities. The essence of loops lies in combining dramatic play with language drills in the form of repetitive dialogues. The dialogues must bear two important features: ambiguity and dramatic tension. The article provides suggestions on how teachers can create their own loops, and it describes the way loops can be used in the language classroom.

1 What are loops?

Loops are short dialogues that can be repeated over and over without stopping because the first line of the dialogue can also function as a reaction to the last line.



On first sight, such a dialogue might remind us of a skipping record playing the same spot again and again. However, when we act it out with a partner several times without a pause, we naturally start varying intonation, volume, rhythm, stress, facial expression, gestures and movement, and before we know it, a meaningful communication situation is beginning to emerge. Suddenly, we find ourselves in the middle of a story. The more we experiment with the

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way of delivering our line, the more possibilities we discover, and producing the same lines over and over turns from mechanic repetition into an exciting challenge. In other words, we are enjoying a drill exercise.

Loops usually practise a certain lexical item or a grammatical structure embedded in a sentence. The target item or structure can be visually marked in order for the learners to see what they are practising. In the following example, the aim is to practise the English present perfect tense together with one of its characteristic time indicators.

A: What do you want?
B: I had to see you.
A: You *haven't* shown up *for the past five years*.
B: Did you miss me?

Some loops may have two or even more concrete language aims. This loop was devised to practise three words that were new in the previous lesson:

A: I want you to release your *dormant* anger.
B: I'm not angry.
A: You *evidently* are.
B: I am not.
A: You are *fuming*.
B: What do you want from me?

An important feature of each effective loop is its *ambiguity*. Loops contain no information about the characters, no stage directions, and the lines themselves should be as universal as possible. It is important that when students work with the loop, there is enough space left for their own decisions about the context. The more decisions they can make about the dialogue, the better chance there is that the lines will become their own. Thus the more ambiguous the loop is, the better. We can illustrate it on the following example, which was created to practise the present perfect, the use of indefinite article, and word order:

A: *Where have you been*?
B: Nowhere.
A: That's not *an* answer.
B: I want to go to bed.
A: No. We need to talk *first*.
B: I'm tired.

The dialogue could be interpreted as a confrontation between a parent and a teenager, a husband and a wife, a policeman and a bank robber and more. There is no right or wrong and if each pair of students can come up with a different interpretation, the language material will stay fresh and interesting for a long time.

Another important feature of an effective loop is *dramatic tension*. The students do not know anything about the characters and the situation when they start reading the loop, but the lines must still manage to arouse their

curiosity and make them want to become personally involved. This can only be achieved if dramatic tension is present. Without searching behind the lines, the reader must instantly feel a certain degree of pressure or nervousness between A and B. The two characters want something from each other (even if it is not clear what), and something is keeping them from getting it. If the characters care about the outcome of the scene, the students will too. Dramatic tension is what makes the students want to stand up and act out the dialogue even before the teacher asks them to do so.

When fulfilling the above mentioned criteria, loops can become a powerful language learning device for the following reasons:

- They offer repetitive and at the same time creative practice narrowly focused on selected language points
- They provide clear examples of language in use that can be easily memorized and internalized
- They naturally stimulate physical involvement and allow for a smooth transition from reading to action
- They engage the learners' emotions and senses, and at the same time they demand cognitive involvement (the learners need to make decisions about the dialogues)
- They provide an easy and dynamic starting point for improvisation activities and writing activities
- They are highly enjoyable.

There is only one challenge connected to the technique: creating the actual loops. As there is no major source of effective loops available yet, teachers will most likely have to write their own loops aimed at their particular group of learners and their present needs. Some advice on how to write loops can be found in the next chapter.

2 How to write loops

Before writing, it is helpful to make a list of the language points we want to address. The language points can come from many different areas: they can be new words, words that were prompted in the previous lesson, words that the students have used incorrectly, idioms, new grammar points, problem-causing structures, short lines from plays, and so on. Each language point can be written on a separate card and used for a short brainstorming session before focussing on a specific dialogue in detail. With the cards, one can easily search for various combinations and group the language points according to emerging ideas.

The first writing attempts might not be easy. Not every short dialogue functions as a loop. The trickiest part is always to close the circle so that there is a smooth transition from the last line to the first, and even that does not always guarantee a complete looping effect: sometimes even a line in the middle of the dialogue can suddenly disturb the logic of it when read for the second time. It is therefore most important to put every created loop through a test: Does it work? Can it be read several times, or is there a place where the loop loses its sense? Will it be easy for the students to come up with a situation in which such a dialogue could take place?

If the teacher has difficulty tying the loose ends together, he or she might find inspiration among the ten tips below:

- Simple contradiction

A: I didn't kiss her.
B: You did.
A: I didn't.
B: You did.

- Refusal

A: Give it back.
B: No.

- Polite refusal

A: Have another dumpling.
B: No, thank you.

- Asking why

A: You're early.
B: You told me to come early.
A: You'll have to wait.
B: Why?

- Using exactly in the first line and what else in the last line

A: What exactly are your intentions with me?
B: I'll tell you when the time comes.
A: When will that be?
B: Soon.
A: I want to know more!
B: My intentions are good. Are you happy now?
A: No.
B: What else do you need to know?

- Sending someone away

A: It's time to go to bed.
B: In a minute.
A: You have to get up early.
B: I know. I'm coming.
A: What are you doing there?
B: Please go away.

- Interrogation

A: Where is it?
B: I don't know.

- Bad hearing

A: I have the impression that we are saying the same things over and over.
B: What did you say?

- Disbelief

A: You stole it!
B: I didn't steal anything! I borrowed it from you.
A: But I didn't lend it to you.
B: What are you saying?

- Not listening

A: Let's do something unusual.
B: U-huh.
A: Let's get out of the city.
B: U-huh.
A: Let's go to that restaurant where we went on our first date, and eat seafood just like then.
B: U-huh.
A: Are you listening?
B: What?

The ten tips are only examples. Any teacher who tries creating loops will most likely discover many other ways of closing them.

If the loop is formally seamless but it still does not feel right, it may be lacking one of the two features mentioned earlier: ambiguity and dramatic tension, as it is the case in the following example:

A: What did Sarah *tell him* about the book?
B: Nothing.

Though this dialogue can be read repetitively, it somehow does not seem worth

the effort. It is not ambiguous enough because it contains unnecessary specific information: we know that there is a woman or girl involved whose name is Sarah, and we know that the problem has something to do with a book. By providing this kind of information, we are taking away some of the mystery, restricting the students' freedom to play and create. In order to increase ambiguity, the redundant information must be removed. The dialogue is also low in dramatic tension: There is no obvious link between the relationship of A and B and the problem they are talking about. The problem happened in the past and an important part was played by two characters who are now absent. In order to increase dramatic tension, the conflict must be brought closer to the main characters: something must be happening between them here and now. Even though the language aim of the above example is the correct use of the verb *tell* and its indirect object, and mentioning other characters is therefore inevitable, the tension can still be created by making A and B more involved:

A: What did you *tell him* about me?
B: Nothing.

Writing effective loops may, at first, turn out to be strenuous and time-consuming. However, once the teacher has created several loops that have worked in class, the writing process will become much faster and enjoyable. Many loops can also be re-used simply by substituting different expressions into the existing lines. Moreover, teachers can share their loops. For English, a small database of loops can be viewed at `www.actandspeak.com`, and in the future it is planned to be extended and opened to contributions from other teachers.

3 How to use loops

Loops can be used as a five-minute warm-up or as a longer activity, even as a complex set of activities stretching over one lesson. Below is a suggestion of a lesson plan aimed at a group of students who have not worked with loops before. It covers the basic range of activities that can be done with loops, from simple reading tasks to original scene presentations. However, there are many other ways of composing a lesson plan that includes loops, and it is only natural that teachers will use the technique in the way that they find most effective.

Before the lesson, it is necessary to prepare handouts with the loops. A larger font should be used and the individual loops should be visually separated from each other to enable easy orientation on the page. The first loop on the sheet should be short and easy to remember.

STEP 1: PREPARATION

Students are divided into pairs. Each pair should have enough space around them. They are standing. The teacher hands out sheets with loops.

STEP 2: COMPREHENSION AND PRONUNCIATION

The teacher asks the students to look at the first dialogue. He or she checks comprehension and makes sure the students can pronounce everything. In

case a new lexical item or a structure is being introduced, the teacher should present it sufficiently in order for the students to understand the loop and read it correctly. No attention is paid to the remaining loops yet.

STEP 3: DEMONSTRATION

The teacher explains that the students will read the dialogue as a loop, over and over without stopping, until they hear a sound signal (for example a triangle or a bell). The teacher demonstrates the activity with a student.

STEP 4: FIRST LOOP

The students start reading the first loop in pairs, all pairs at the same time. The teacher walks around and makes sure everyone understands the task. Some pairs might be performing the "skipping record" rather than trying for a smooth transition: they might come to a stop after reading the last line, and then start over in exactly the same way as before. The best way to help them is usually to demonstrate the activity with one of them.

STEP 5: EYE CONTACT

The students exchange roles. They read the same loop again, only as soon as they feel they remember what to say, they stop looking into their sheet and make eye contact. If they are confident enough, they can put their sheet away. They can come back to reading any time they feel like it.

STEP 6: SECOND LOOP

The students find new partners and look at the second loop. Again, the teacher checks the language first. Then the students start reading the loop, knowing that as soon as they remember what to say, they should make eye contact. This time, the teacher encourages them to experiment with intonation, stress, and movement in order to change the meaning of the lines.

STEP 7: CONTEXT CREATION

The teacher asks the students to think of a situation in which such a dialogue could take place. Who is speaking? What is their relationship? Where are they? What is their problem? After a brief discussion, each pair decides on a specific context for the loop.

STEP 8: ACTING

The partners switch roles. They perform the second loop again, this time in the specific context they have chosen. They can decide on what their characters will be doing when the scene starts, but they should not be planning too far ahead: some space must be left for spontaneous action. The teacher helps where needed. Good advice to the students is always to take their time. If it is their turn to speak but their line does not fit the situation, the solution will always be patience, silence, and movement. Sooner or later, physical action will create new conditions for producing the line.

STEP 9: IMPROVISATION

The teacher interrupts the activity. He or she explains that it will continue in a moment: the pairs will keep the loop going in their chosen context. However,

as soon as they hear the sound signal, the student whose turn it is to speak will no longer be bound by the script, and he or she must say something different. The other student will react spontaneously and they will improvise until they manage to end the scene. While some pairs usually finish right away, adding only one or two extra lines, some pairs might embark on an exciting adventure, and the teacher may silently gesture to the early finishers to simply watch.

STEP 10: REPEAT PROCEDURE

When all pairs have finished, the teacher asks everyone to find a new partner. Trading partners is very important because some students are more active than others, and their ideas might inspire the shyer ones. The same procedure as before is then repeated: First, the language is checked. Then the partners read the loop several times, getting used to the lines, memorizing them, and discovering the possibilities of action. Then they decide on the characters and the context of the dialogue and perform the loop in reversed roles. After the sound signal, they improvise the ending. Finally, they find new partners and move on to the next loop on the sheet. While the students are improvising, the teacher can walk around and take notes of mistakes for delayed correction (see STEP 14).

STEP 11: WRITING

Once the group has gone through the whole list of loops, the students form new pairs. The teacher assigns one loop from the list to each pair. Partners share their impressions and experiences about working on the particular loop earlier on. They talk about the context they created for the loop with their previous partners, and about the improvised ending. Then they create yet another version of the context and an ending, which might be inspired by the previous experience with the loop, or it can be entirely new. They write the ending down. The teacher walks around and checks the emerging scenes continuously to help the students eliminate mistakes and avoid awkward formulations.

STEP 12: REHEARSAL

Each pair rehearses their scene in the following way: first, the original loop from the sheet is repeated three times in a row in order to expose the situation, and after that the scene continues according to what the pair has written. The students should try to memorize their lines and actually rehearse their scenes in action, focussing on correct pronunciation and clarity.

STEP 13: PRESENTATIONS

Each pair performs their scene once without stopping. Should some parts be unclear, the scene can be repeated with the permission for the audience to freeze it, rewind, ask questions and so on. The students are usually interested in watching the others perform as they know all the loops and they are curious what new interpretation and ending there will be. If this is not the case, additional tasks may be assigned to the audience (for example, each performed scene is reconstructed and replayed by another pair).

STEP 14: DELAYED CORRECTION

During the entire lesson, the teacher has certainly collected some language mistakes, especially while checking the written scenes and listening to the

improvisations. Also, some pairs may have asked him or her for help with specific words or structures. Some students may have used a word or an idiom that was new for the others. This is the stage of the lesson in which the valuable material can be shared. Some of the newly emerged language points can even be taken as material for the next loop session, and the students can be challenged to try to write some loops themselves.

STEP 15: ASSIGNING HOMEWORK

There are several possibilities of further work with the loop sheet at home in order to consolidate the language points. The students can try to write a scene, a story or a letter that includes all the marked language points from the sheet. They may also cut the sheet up and create a new scene by re-ordering the lines, with or without adding their own lines and/or stage directions. They can write a one-line ending to each loop on the sheet. Alternatively, they may choose a loop and use it as a starting point or even as an ending to a short scene.

4 A final note

The technique was developed in 2006 at the Jeviste language school in Prague as a part of *act and speak*®, a drama-based FLT method. Since then, it has been continuously used in different types of courses and schools, from monolingual groups of very young learners, to international groups of adult students. The practice of using loops with learners of different proficiency levels, and the exploration of ways of adjusting the technique to the needs of different age groups, shows that there are still many ways to go and many doors to open. In order to further improve the technique, any feedback will be greatly appreciated, including contributions to the planned database of loops as well as new ideas on how to work with them.