

Practice makes perfect? A review of second language teaching methods

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Abstract

This article explores the role of practice within second language teaching. It begins by defining the term and then reviews how practice has been applied throughout language teaching history. The article then reports how skill acquisition theories have informed the use of practice within language teaching methods. It then discusses how research in second language acquisition (SLA) have since promoted modern approaches involving practice instruction. The final section then examines issues regarding the implementation of these approaches within Asian educational contexts. Overall, this paper shows how practice has been applied in different ways within language teaching, and that no one method appears superior. Consequently, it is useful for teachers to have an understanding of the pros and cons of each method so as to benefit their own teaching.

Key words: practice, skill acquisition, present-practice-produce, task-based learning

Introduction

As human beings, we generally consider skill learning to be an important process for improving our self-worth. Whatever the skill, be it driving a car, using a computer or learning to swim, people have to engage in practice in order to master skills. For example, Ericsson (2006) reported that skilled musicians are known to have practiced for over 10,000 hours to reach expert level. Within the field of second language learning, the importance of practice is no exception, the question is how practice can be maximised to improve second language skills.

SLA research concerning the effects of practice is especially relevant within Asian educational contexts where East Asian governments have recently expressed a desire to improve learners' second language (L2) speaking skills (Sakui, 2004). For example, since 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan have been calling for improvements in Japanese university learners' English skills. MEXT was dissatisfied with traditional language learning methods that focused heavily on grammar translation, writing and reading, and were not effective for

developing learners' L2 oral skills. As a result, MEXT voiced the need for English instruction to focus more on developing learners' communication skills (Mochizuki and Ortega, 2008). Consequently, English language courses at the university level in Japan began focusing more on improving learners' use of English, whilst more communicative methods of instruction have been introduced in classrooms (Thompson and Millington, 2012; Thompson and Jones, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to review communicative L2 teaching methods to determine how language skills can be maximised through practice in the classroom. First, due to the significant amount of research conducted on practice within SLA, it is important that we clarify what we mean by the term. According to Dekeyser (2007), practice refers to 'specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language' (p. 1). In other words, practice involves using some form of pedagogic activity to develop learners' knowledge, or their skill in an L2, in terms of reading, listening, writing or speaking. This paper begins by providing an historical review of practice and how it has been used and evolved over time within second language teaching. We then look at theories of skill acquisition from cognitive psychology research that attempt to explain how skills in general are developed through practice. The next section then discusses how skill acquisition theory has informed the role of practice within second language teaching methodology. This follows on to examine how practice is used within modern pedagogy by analysing task-based learning. The article then concludes by discussing the implications of implementing modern teaching methods within Asian educational contexts.

The history of practice within language teaching

Language teaching methods first gained prominence in the eighteenth century (Dekeyser, 1998). One of the first approaches, grammar translation simply involved translating the L2 into the learner's L1 using reading and writing exercises and the study of vocabulary lists. No attention was placed on practicing or developing communication skills (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). During the mid-twentieth century, the audiolingual method became popular because it focused on developing L2 speaking skills (VanPatten, 1996). Audiolingualism considered repetition to be an important part of language learning. The method typically involved learners, individually, practicing linguistic phrases in isolation, in an attempt to memorize specific language features, and be able to produce them accurately.

In the 1970s, language teaching began placing more emphasis on developing communication skills, as opposed to simply practicing grammatical features. Hymes (1972) introduced the notion of communicative competence, arguing that learners should move beyond grammar practice to start practicing communication functions, such as, asking and answering personal questions, apologizing etc. As a consequence of this shift in method, teachers also began placing less emphasis on practising

for accuracy and instead began to encourage fluency practice. For example, learners were provided with more communication activities to practice in pairs or groups, so as to produce more L2 output, at the expense of accuracy (see for example, Prabhu, 1987).

Around the same time, other SLA researchers such as Krashin (1981) began disputing the need for speaking practice as a means to acquire a second language. Instead, Krashin argued that learners simply needed ample amounts of comprehensible language input, in the form of listening or reading, which would then facilitate L2 acquisition. In other words, if learners could be regularly exposed to L2 language, not too advanced from their current level, they should be able to naturally ‘pick up’ new features which they could later use orally. Krashin’s claims then gave way to a debate in the field over which form of practice is more beneficial for language learning; productive practice involving speaking, or receptive practice involving listening (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). Finally, since the 1990s, more authentic, communicative language teaching approaches, such as task-based learning have emerged that place an importance on learners performing ‘real-world’ tasks in classrooms (Dekeyer, 2007). SLA researchers reported that traditional methods, such as audiolingualism involving the practice specific sentences in isolation did not result in acquisition (Ellis, 1984). At this time, Lightbown (1985) claimed that “practice does not make perfect” (1985: 177). Researchers argued that for acquisition to occur, learners had to practice using grammatical features in *context*, in other words, using features for actual, communicative purposes. According to Lightbown (2000), ‘when ‘practice’ is defined as opportunities for meaningful language use (both receptive and productive) and for thoughtful, effortful practice of difficult linguistic features, then the role of practice is clearly beneficial and even essential’ (p. 443).

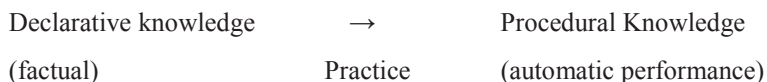
Looking back through the history of second language teaching, it is clear that practice has played an important role within language learning, and has been applied in different ways. Language teaching has placed an emphasis on grammatical sentence practice for accuracy, communicative task practice for fluency, and arguments for listening practice vs speaking practice for acquisition. Given the various ways practice has been implemented within language teaching leads us to ask *how* it assists language learning, and which method is most effective? The effects of practice have been explored for decades within the field of cognitive psychology. The benefits of practice apply not only to language learning but to most life skills in general. Cognitive research on skill learning, such as the widely accepted Anderson et al.’s (2004) Adaptive Control of Thought – Rationale (ACT-R), are referred to as skill acquisition theories. The next section examines skill theory in detail.

Skill acquisition theory

ACT-R theory has been refined for 25 years (see Anderson 1993, 1995; Anderson and Shunn, 2000). It explains how individuals develop skills, in general, by processing knowledge. According to skill acquisition theory, knowledge of any skill can be categorized into two forms; declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. ‘Declarative knowledge is explicit knowledge that we can report and of which we are consciously aware’ (Anderson 1995, p. 308). In terms of language, declarative knowledge can be developed through explicit instruction of grammar rules. For example, a learner receiving instruction on the rules on 3rd person singular / plural. However, a learner with only declarative knowledge may know the rules of an L2 but would struggle using the language in real-time communication. Procedural knowledge, alternatively, ‘is knowledge of how to do things, and it often implicit’ (Anderson, 1995 p. 308). In terms of language, this would involve a learner having the ability to use the L2 fluently and proficiently. According to ACT-R, procedural knowledge consists of units referred to as ‘productions’ which can be activated to perform cognitive actions automatically, such as speaking. Productions are developed by accessing a learner’s declarative knowledge to obtain information to carry out a cognitive function. For example, if a learner had to respond to a question in the L2, he or she would first have to think of a response, then choose the correct language to use, then finally articulate the response. According to ACT-R, once this function has been performed, the production rules of that function can be called upon again and can eventually be performed automatically, but this success depends on practice. Anderson and Fincham (1994) reported that certain cognitive actions may have to be practised approximately 40 times to achieve automatic performance (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Skill learning theory



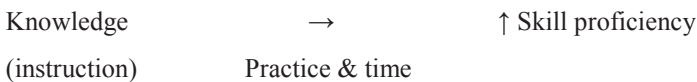
In short, skill acquisition theory stipulates that skills are learned by first acquiring declarative knowledge which can then assist the development of procedural knowledge through practicing the chosen cognitive action. Skills can then reach automatic performance, in terms of speed and low error rate through extensive practice. (For a more detailed account of skill theory, see Thompson (2018).

Studies of skill acquisition learning

Anderson (1995) supported the claim of skill theory by reporting studies that investigated experts of numerous skills. Studies such as Simon and Gilmarin (1973 cited in Anderson 1995) claimed that expert chess players are required to know to up 50,000 rules of chess in order to compete at championship level. Furthermore, Hayes (1985) examined geniuses of diverse fields from music to science, and reported that their work only reached a level of brilliance after approximately 10 years of practice. These results gave weight to Anderson's (1995) claim that skill acquisition appears to start with acquiring factual, declarative knowledge about the skill, and then through time and practice the skill eventually can be performed proficiently (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Skill learning



Research into the effects of practice have also found other variables, other than time, that influence the process of knowledge transitioning from a declarative state to procedural skill. Ericson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993) reported the *nature* of practice can greater enhance the process to which skills can be performed automatically. Their study examined students learning the violin at a music school in Germany, and they found a correlation between the advanced violinists and the quality of practice undertaken. The advanced learners often practised during optimal times of the day when they were feeling most alert, and this contributed to their enhanced skill. In addition, Ericsson at al. (1993) noted the effects of practice can be improved by having learners who are motivated by receiving feedback and instruction on their progress.

Dekeyser and Botana (2015) also note that the effects of language practice are limited to the specific skill at hand. Dekeyser and Botana (2015) reviewed numerous studies conducted over the past two decades that examined the effects of skill acquisition theory on language learning. The general consensus was that practice needs to be related to the targeted skill in order for improvements to occur. For example, practice catered towards L2 speaking can result in improved speaking performance, however, there are no transfer gains to other language skills, such as L2 writing. Dekeyser (2007) attributes the skill-specific nature of practice to the development of procedural knowledge (outlined in the previous section) which occurs only from accessing specific information related to the targeted skill from declarative knowledge. Thus, as the cognitive actions to speak in the L2 do not match the skills required to write, one form of practice will not lead to gains in the other skill.

Given the importance of ‘practice’ within the field of cognitive psychology for explaining skill development, how important is the term within SLA research? Ellis (2008) and VanPattern (2004) acknowledge the value of practice for automatizing L2 grammatical features, as well as the benefits of practice for improving pronunciation (Ellis, 1993). However, researchers are not convinced that practice alone is the means by which learners can acquire a second language. Ellis (2008) argues ‘it is difficult to accept that the acquisition of all L2 features begins with declarative knowledge’ (p. 481). In other words, do all features of a second language have to first be explicitly instructed to learners, and then systematically practiced until each feature has been acquired? Ellis (2008) points to the significant amount language that learners can acquire incidentally, for example, studying abroad where L2 language can be simply ‘picked up’ through interaction, and does not require extensive practice.

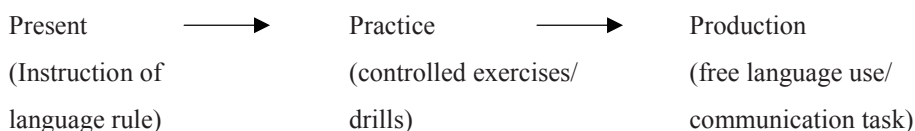
Despite concern over the importance of practice within SLA research, practice as a means for language learning is nevertheless widely used in various forms throughout the world. We now turn to see the extent to which practice is used with foreign language teaching methods. We will look to see how cognitive theories of skill acquisition discussed in the previous section correspond with the foreign language teaching methods summarised at the beginning of this paper.

Skill acquisition theories and second language teaching methods

As discussed earlier, skill acquisition theories consider knowledge to consist of a declarative (factual) form and a procedural (automatic) form. Skills are developed by declarative knowledge assisting the development of procedural knowledge through practice. A language methodology close in resemblance to skill acquisition theory is ‘present-practice-produce (PPP)’ (Ellis, 2003 p. 29). The PPP method is considered to be the most widely used approach in second language textbooks across the world (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). Language learning under PPP consists of three main stages, the first stage ‘present’ involves explicit instruction of a linguistic feature. For example, learners are presented with a grammar feature such as English relative clauses, and then receive instruction about the rules of the feature. The next stage, ‘practice’ would consist of a series of grammar exercises that allow learners to practice the rules. Finally, ‘production’ usually involves some sort of communicative activity, such as a role-play, that requires the use of the feature in context. The PPP procedure is therefore designed to move from controlled practice to freer use of language features (see figure 3).

Figure 3

Present-Practice-Production (PPP)



Dekeyser (2007) notes the similarities of PPP's method with skill acquisition theory, as the presentation stage resembles the declarative stage of skill learning where learners receive explicit instruction about the skill. The practice stage then is comparable with facilitating procedural knowledge as learners begin applying the rules they have learned for controlled use of the form. Finally, production can be seen as learners automatizing their use of a targeted feature by using it fluently in a communicative activity. Similar to skill theory, Dekeyser (2007) argues that the PPP procedure of initial explicit instruction, followed by practice into freer communicative use is an effective formula for L2 acquisition. Numerous studies have investigated the PPP method, testing a variety of grammatical features with speaking practice, and the results generally support the claims of skill acquisition, in that learners could significantly improve their use of the forms through practice. However, in line with skill theory, the practice effects do not transfer over to other skills.

Massed practice vs distributed practice

An issue that exists regarding the PPP approach is the time it takes for language features to be acquired and available for automatic use. Second language textbooks that follow PPP, often present a list of grammatical features in some particular order. Each item is then usually displayed on a page and presented to learners through a three stage PPP sequence. However, it is unclear how much time is needed for all this knowledge to become automatized. A number of factors can affect this process, for example, proficiency level, motivation, teacher feedback, learners' affective filters etc. But even with all these variables constant, SLA researchers doubt whether language features can be mastered through PPP's three stages in one lesson. As Lightbown (2002) notes, 'research evidence shows that communicative practice in the classroom, as valuable as it is, is not sufficient to lead learners to a high degree of fluency and accuracy in all aspects of second language production' (p. 443). If Lightbown's claim is true; that language proficiency cannot be achieved in the classroom, how then should language courses be structured to maximise the effects of practice? Serrano (2011) examined the effects of language learning practice over different periods of time. Using a pre- post-test design that tested production and comprehension skills, intermediate level learners at a university in Barcelona were placed into two groups, both receiving 110 hours of PPP related instruction. Once group

received 'regular' practice over 7 months involving 2 hour sessions, once a week. The other group received 'massed' practice which resembled an intensive-style format held over 4.5 weeks involving 5 hours sessions, five days a week. The results of the study showed significant improvements for the intermediate learners who received massed practice. The pedagogic implications of this study indicate that massed practice involving multiple lessons scheduled over a short period of time may have greater effect on language learning than classes spread out over a longer duration.

Conversely, the benefits of more 'distributed' practice over time can be found in Thompson's (2014) study that examined Japanese intermediate learners' use of English relative clauses. This grammar point is known to be difficult for Japanese learners to produce (Mochizuki and Ortega, 2008). As a result, communication tasks were designed to elicit relative clauses by having learners narrate picture stories that required the use of the form. Students were required to complete two tasks a week over a seven week period. The procedure followed a PPP related method that first involved explicit instruction of the feature from the teacher, then each week, learners would attempt to complete the tasks using the target feature. The pre- post-test results showed significant gains in use of relative clauses. As the study also reported significant gains from delayed tests conducted two weeks after the immediate post-test suggests that regular, distributed practice could have benefits for long-term retention of language features.

Despite the empirical research conducted on PPP studies, the approach along with skill acquisition theory in general, have been labelled problematic by numerous SLA researchers as a form of language instruction (see for example, Ellis, 2008; Ellis and Shintani 2014; VanPatten, 2004). SLA researchers are quick to point out that second languages are not necessarily acquired through a process of explicit instruction followed by extensive practice, and a significant amount of foreign language can be acquired incidentally, without the need for practice. Furthermore, Ellis (2003) argues 'the problem remains that presenting and practicing features learners have failed to use correctly in production may not result in their acquisition if learners are not developmentally ready to acquire them' (p. 30). In other words, presenting a textbook to students with prescribed grammar features might not be the type of language they currently need, or are ready to learn. Consequently, learners may forget structures that have been rigorously practiced.

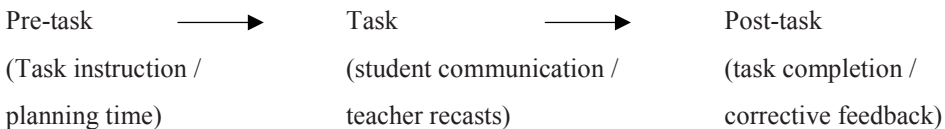
Given the criticisms levelled at PPP, SLA researchers began investigating and promoting an alternative method of second language teaching, one that does not pre-determine language features to be taught (Bygate et al. 2001; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1996; Robinson, 2001; Willis, 1998). This method, termed 'task-based learning' facilitates learning through interaction with students learning from their own mistakes. The following section discusses this method and the implications for practice in detail.

Task-based learning

Task-based learning (TBL) is considered within SLA to be the forefront of modern pedagogy (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). The aim of TBL is to develop learners' communication skills by having students complete tasks. Numerous definitions have been put forward claiming what a task is, however, the one by Bygate et al. (2001) is simple and concise, 'a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective' (p.11). In other words, tasks require learners to interact with each other in the L2 in order to reach some sort of goal. For example, deciding how to decorate a house with a fixed budget, or completing an information gap activity. The emphasis on meaning relates to students using their own L2 ability to complete the task. A very important component of TBL is that no explicit instruction is given about language to be used during a task. Only the task instructions are explained, the actual language needed to complete the task is determined by the learners. Students are, however, given planning time during the 'pre-task stage' in order to think of what to say during the task. Willis and Willis (2007) note the rationale for not providing language guidance relates to the importance of learners using their *own* linguistic resources to complete tasks. For example, any communication difficulties a learner could face could be overcome by other learners in the group assisting or negotiating that learner's intentions. In addition, Ellis (2009) notes a key stage for learning in TBL occurs through teacher feedback during a task, as learners are communicating. Specifically, the teacher corrects learner errors as they occur. Known as 'recasts', correcting learners' mistakes during natural communication is argued by TBL advocates to be a more effective means of language learning than PPP and the instruction of pre-determined language (Ellis and Shintani, 2014) (see figure 4).

Figure 4.

Task-based learning (TBL)



In terms of the role of practice within TBL, Dekyesser (2010) notes that language features are not systematically practiced (as in the case with PPP), but that tasks themselves could be repeated by learners, thus serving as a form of practice. Dekeyser (2015) later reported that task repetition can serve to fine tune learners' linguistic skills, as each repetition can further assist the automatization of L2 communication skills. Empirical studies into the effects of task sequencing have yielded positive results in terms of L2 fluency (see for example, Bygate, 2001; Lambert et al, 2016). According to

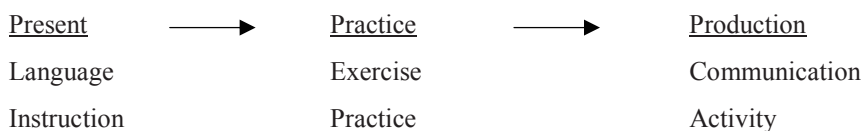
Bygate (2001), task repetition assists L2 fluency because the cognitive work of the first performance, in terms of thinking about what to say, tends to be stored in the learner’s memory on the subsequent performance. This information can then be accessed at a quicker rate during subsequent repetitions which allows the learner to communicate faster resulting in improved performance. However, similar to skill theory, Ellis (2009) notes that practice effects of task repetition are also task specific, in that gains in one task-type, for example, deciding the ending of a story, do not transfer to improved performance of another task-type, for example, completing an information-gap activity.

Although tasks can be practiced and repeated to boost L2 fluency, a drawback of this method is that learners could soon lose interest in repeating the same or similar task. Another issue relates to how tasks can push learners’ linguistic repertoire beyond fluency, in the form of speed, but also to develop their use of complex L2 language, for example, use of more advanced grammatical features. Robinson (2011) attempted to address these issues by providing a framework for practicing tasks that increase in complexity, termed the Cognition Hypothesis. The Cognition Hypothesis involves learners performing slightly different tasks that become more difficult by ‘having learners perform tasks simple on all the relevant parameters of task demands first, and then gradually increasing their cognitive complexity on subsequent versions’ (p. 242). For example, in terms of being able to give directions in the L2, a task could involve giving directions using a map that contains little detail, thus requiring basic language use to complete the task. Learners could then progress to giving directions using complex maps with lots of detail that would require more complex grammatical structures and vocabulary. Teachers could then provide feedback during each task performance by correcting learner mistakes. Empirical studies reporting the effects of tasks sequenced according to the Cognition Hypothesis can be found in Baralt et al. (2014).

In conclusion, we have seen that the TBL method contrasts quite differently with PPP in that TBL provides no language guidance before learners carry out tasks. Instead, learners are encouraged to use their own L2 knowledge to collaborate together to complete tasks. Instead of learning occurring at the first stage of the method (as with PPP) learning occurs during task performance by correcting learner mistakes (see figure 5).

Figure 5

Present-practice-production (PPP) vs Task-based learning (TBL)





The following section discusses the pros and cons of these approaches within an Asian language learning context.

Issues implementing communicative teaching methods

As we have seen, SLA researchers clearly favour skills-based teaching approaches, such as PPP and TBL that look to develop learners' L2 communication skills. Studies that have tested these approaches have found that activities, such as tasks, can not only develop learners' L2 skills in terms of fluency and accuracy, but that also teachers and Asian learners consider this form of learning to be motivational (Thompson and Blake (2009); Thompson and Jones (2013)). However, there are a number of practical issues with successfully implementing communicative methods within Asian educational contexts, particularly with attempts at improving students' L2 speaking skills (Ellis, 2009). For example, Carless' (2004) study (cited in Ellis, 2009) reported issues concerning a TBL course at an elementary school in Hong Kong. As the learners' proficiency level was low, they did not have sufficient L2 ability to complete tasks, and as a result, little L2 speech was produced, whilst teachers of the program also appeared to lack the training required to instruct a skills-based course effectively. Thus, within an Asian context, it appears that communicative teaching methods require students to have a certain amount of L2 knowledge, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, in order for learners to be able to perform communicative tasks. Second, teachers (whether they are native or non-native speakers of English) must also have the required education to be able to design courses to meet the needs of their learners, and be able to instruct these courses effectively.

In addition, there are also hierarchical obstacles that hinder the implementation of modern communicative teaching methods, as Ellis (2009) notes that 'educational systems in many parts of the world place the emphasis on knowledge-learning rather than skill development' (p. 242). For example, in Japan, university entrance exams test English knowledge, not skills. These exams focus on grammar and reading rather than speaking. Moreover, at the university level, TOEIC is considered a measure of students' English proficiency and is considered very important for students' career prospects. Yet as TOEIC generally focuses on English knowledge rather than speaking skills, it is understandable why teachers would want to focus their efforts on the requirements of tests, rather than developing students' communication skills (Mochizuki and Ortega, 2008). Consequently, communicative methods such as TBL and PPP may not be desirable for teachers to use compared with

grammar translation that focuses more on L2 knowledge and memorization of language rules. In short, we can see that language course designers and teachers are therefore under pressure to teach for tests, as well as for communication skills, as outlined earlier by MEXT.

Another problem facing TBL and PPP relates to large class sizes (Ellis, 2009). As students perform tasks in groups, it is problematic for a teacher to encourage L2 use and give feedback when dealing with multiple groups simultaneously performing tasks. However, Thompson and Millington's (2012) study showed that by allocating tasks that are slightly different in design or storyline, to each group, then having each group present the outcome of their task to the class as a whole, encourages learners to use the L2. Also, by assigning roles to certain students as a group leader, can further encourage learner L2 interaction.

Finally, Ellis (2009) points out cultural issues that could affect successful implementation of communicative teaching methods within Asian contexts. As we have seen, TBL is centred around learner interaction and learner autonomy in the classroom. This teaching approach may conflict with more traditional learning practices where respect between the teacher and the student is paramount, and consequently, instruction is expected to be teacher-led, without necessarily involving learner collaboration. Thus, language methods such as grammar translation that do not involve learner interaction may be a better fit with such cultural, educational values. In short, although modern teaching methods seem justified in terms of fostering students' L2 communication skills, a number of practical and possibly cultural issues exist that could hinder successful implementation of skills-based language courses.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the role of practice within different language teaching methods to determine how best practice can be applied in the classroom. We have seen how theoretical models of skill learning have informed second language teaching. Findings from cognitive psychology research and SLA research suggest that language learning can be maximised through deliberate practice by studying at optimal times of the day, and by receiving regular feedback on performance. There is also a case that intensive practice, involving longer periods of study over shorter spaces of time, is more beneficial than shorter periods of study over a longer time duration. In addition, we have seen how SLA research has promoted the use of communicative teaching methods for developing learners' language skills but that a number of factors serve as an obstacle for successful program implementation. As a result, given that each learner's needs are different, and that a single, unified teaching method does not exist within SLA, it seems best to apply practice using a variety of approaches throughout the different levels of a learner's L2 proficiency.

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