Getting the Most out of Practice: Choosing Materials

Why does choosing materials for practice matter?



The stimulus *(the source material that you will interpret)* you use for a specific practice session will have a big effect on the practice session, so it's important to choose materials with care. For example,

- If a stimulus is not a good match for the learning stage you are currently at, it might be too easy (and thus not stretch your skills) or too difficult (and thus make you feel discouraged or demotivated).
- If a stimulus doesn't match up well with the goal(s) you're targeting during a practice session, you will have a harder time achieving those goals—or the stimulus could even get in the way of you achieving your goal(s). Here are a couple of examples:
  - ◊ Proper names and numbers are hard to remember, so if you're doing an active listening exercise, a stimulus that is mostly proper names and numbers does not match up well with the goal.
  - ◊ If you are just beginning to learn simultaneous and are focusing on eliminating redundancy, a stimulus that is very fast and has little redundancy will not help you to work on your goal.

How do I choose materials?

- Your instructor will often choose & provide materials for you as you progress through your program. Make sure to take advantage of these materials, as they are generally carefully selected (and sometimes modified) to match up with the goals you should be working on at a given moment in time.
- When you choose your own materials, consider the goal(s) you are working on and what characteristics might make for a good/not-so-good choice in light of your goal(s). Some things to think about:
  - ◊ Speed—How fast is the stimulus material? If I am not specifically focusing on dealing with speed, is the material too fast? Can I slow down the material?
  - ◊ Density of information—How much information is packed into the stimulus? Is there any redundancy (is information repeated)? Is the information explained in detail, with examples, or is it presented quickly without explanation/detail?
  - ◊ Purpose/type of material—Is the material meant to educate or inform a general audience (*in which case it is likely to be less dense and more redundant*)? Is the material argumentative/persuasive in nature *(in which case there may be complex thought patterns or trains of thought)*?
  - ◊ Type of delivery/presentation—Is the material highly rehearsed or read *(in which case it is likely to be more dense, less redundant, and faster, but may be more organized)*, or is it extemporaneous or improvised *(in which case it is likely to be less dense, more redundant, and slower, but may be more disorganized)*?
  - ◊ Presence/absence of specific aspects relevant to goal(s)—Does the material have enough (or too much) of a feature or characteristic that I am working on? For example, names/numbers, specialized terminology, speed, different accents, challenges related to interaction management, etc.

What do I do if I realize that material I am working with is not ideal for my current goal or skill level?

Don't panic! If this happens, you may need to adjust how you work with the material and what you expect from yourself when you work with it.

- You may shift how you work with the material. For example, if a recording is too fast, you may choose to slow down the playback speed. If you realize that you will have trouble expressing complex ideas or

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terms in the TL, you may choose to re-tell the information in the SL rather than interpreting it on the first try. If you realize that there is a complex argument, you may stop taking notes and concentrate on listening to and understanding the argument on the first try.

- You may decide to shift your goal(s) for the exercise in light of the material. For example, if you are working on listening & analysis and the stimulus has a lot of detailed information or names/numbers, you may decide to focus on noticing and retaining the main ideas, or on understanding the context/meaning associated with names/numbers, rather than retaining the names/numbers themselves.
- You may wish to take some time to prepare (e.g., do research, learn about unfamiliar concepts/ vocabulary) before continuing to practice with the material.
- You may work with the material multiple times, setting yourself smaller/interim goals as you go.
- You may decide to view the exercise as a 'stretch' exercise—understanding that you took on something that was perhaps beyond your current skill level, and evaluating your performance with that understanding in mind. That is, noting what you could do, what you achieved, rather than focusing on what didn't go well, or what you couldn't do. In this situation, it is often a good idea to revisit the material again in a few weeks/months, so that you can see what you have gained/learned in the intervening time.
- If you are frequently having trouble identifying good practice material, or if you are spending more time searching for material than you are spending on practice, be sure to contact your instructor for assistance!

A Few Tips (links are not provided, as they can change—use a search engine to help you find materials, or ask your instructor for assistance):

- Material produced specifically for language learners, which is often useful for practicing with. A couple of examples: Voice of America English language learners section, BBC Six-Minute English videos.
- Educational/informational materials produced by public/institutional sources—e.g., videos produced by school districts, patient education materials produced by hospitals, information about social/public services produced by government organizations, advocacy groups, and so forth.
- You can often find "sample" or "mock" examples of common types of interactions via YouTube or other video repositories. For example, you might find a model special education meeting, or a video meant to train doctors in interviewing techniques, or a sample of a social services interview.
- Many organizations and agencies have versions of their material produced in many languages. These can make ideal sources for practice material.
- The following are often less-than-ideal stimuli for practice, unless you have a specific reason to work with them. Approach use of the following stimuli with caution:
  - ◊ Songs/Poetry/Plays
  - ◊ Dense/complex presentations that are being read from a script or are highly rehearsed (e.g., TED Talks).
  - ◊ Presentations accompanied by a lot of text (e.g., on a powerpoint or video)
  - ◊ Material about complex topics that you are not at all familiar with

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Remember:

Preparing before you practice (*e.g., brainstorming, research)* and **working multiple times** with the same stimulus are valid and important components of effective practice!

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