

# Drill tables

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## Example drill tables

(see article below for how to use them)

Basic drill table (good for dynamic verbs)

<b>I</b>	<b>have lunch</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>	<b>use the computer</b>	
<b>he</b>	<b>listen to music</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>	<b>cycle</b>	
<b>we</b>	<b>eat pizza</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>	<b>watch TV</b>	

Factual drill table (good for stative verbs)

<b>I</b>	<b>work hard</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>	<b>live in Madrid</b>	
<b>he</b>	<b>like coffee</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>	<b>have children</b>	
<b>we</b>	<b>know a lot</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>	<b>speak 3 languages</b>	

Tense-specific drill table (use with perfect tenses)

<b>I</b>	<b>already</b>	<b>finish cleaning</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>			
<b>he</b>	<b>still</b>	<b>do (one's) homework</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>			
<b>we</b>	<b>yet</b>	<b>have dinner</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>			

Comparative adjective drill table

<b>I</b>	<b>tall</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>	<b>old</b>	<b>you</b>	
<b>he</b>	<b>happy</b>	<b>he</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>	<b>sociable</b>	<b>she</b>	
<b>we</b>	<b>hard-working</b>	<b>we</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>	<b>quiet</b>	<b>they</b>	



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When we introduce new grammar, many of us like to use spoken drills to provide learners with controlled practice of the new language. For the last few years I've been using what I call 'drill tables' to do this. I'm not sure if other teachers do something similar, but I've found them a simple, engaging and effective way to drill new verb tenses. They can be used for traditional whole class drills, but also for pairwork and groupwork as 'peer-drills'.

## What is a drill table?

I	have lunch	+
you	use the computer	
he	listen to music	-
she	cycle	
we	eat pizza	?
they	watch TV	

Figure 1: A basic drill table

Figure 1 shows a drill table. At first glance it looks a bit like the form tables that you often find in the grammar reference section of coursebooks. But look more closely and you'll see that it's rather different. It doesn't show the correct form of the verb, it includes only the subjects, a selection of verb phrases (in bare infinitive form) and 3 symbols for positive (+), negative (-) and question (?) forms.

## How do you use drill tables?

Let's say you've introduced a new verb form. We'll use present perfect continuous for this example, but it can be used with any tense, aspect or other form (e.g. 'going to'). You've already covered the meaning, the form and the basic pronunciation of the structure, but you feel they need a little more practice before using it in freer speaking activities. Here's where a drill table comes in useful as an alternative to a conventional drill. You can draw one on the board quickly using any verb phrases you like, or you can keep one pre-prepared on a poster near the board. Get everyone's attention and then, using your finger or a pointer, point at one box in each column (e.g. she, eat pizza, +) while students watch. They must now quickly try to say the correct positive sentence (no writing) using the subject and verb phrase that you just pointed at. The correct response would be:

"She's been eating pizza."

Then do another (e.g. they, use the computer, ?). Now students have to say:

"Have they been using the computer?"

And a third (e.g. I, watch TV, -):

"I haven't been watching TV."

Continue doing this at a quick pace until the students are beginning to produce sentences fairly quickly. It's quite challenging because it requires them to hold both the lexical and grammatical information in their working memory as they compose the sentence. This forces them to concentrate hard, and in some classes a



competitive element creeps in (Who can say it first?). You can often practise for three or four minutes with good levels of concentration.

### Pairwork and groupwork drills

Now put the students into pairs or small groups, and get them to copy the table into their notebooks. Some classes may enjoy personalising it with their own verb phrases and using the names of classmates instead of 'he' or 'she'. Then they take turns being the 'teacher'. The 'teacher' points at one box in each column, and their partner or other group members have to say the sentence. They can turn it into a fun game if they like, with the student who says it first correctly scoring a point, or losing a point if they make a mistake. This should give them another 3-5 minutes of useful practice working under time pressure to manipulate the form and build their working memory speed. Now they're ready for a freer speaking activity, and they'll hopefully use the new language more accurately after using the drill table.

### Versatility and variations

The example table above could be used for pretty much any tenses/aspects or verb forms that are used with dynamic verbs:

e.g. 1: past continuous: you / listen to music / ? = "Were you listening to music?"

e.g. 2: '(be) going to': we / watch TV / - = "We aren't going to watch TV."

e.g. 3: 'used to': he / cycle / + = "He used to cycle."

However, the sentences won't be so logical with tenses that we often use to describe facts or states, so you may need to adapt the verb phrases a little. The drill table in Figure 2 could be used with present simple, past simple, etc.

<b>I</b>	<b>work hard</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>	<b>live in Madrid</b>	
<b>he</b>	<b>like coffee</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>	<b>have children</b>	
<b>we</b>	<b>know a lot</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>	<b>speak 3 languages</b>	

Figure 2: Drill table for 'factual' tenses

You can increase the challenge by adding another column, for example with adverbs of frequency (sometimes, never, usually, etc.), or adverbs of completion for use with present perfect simple. Figure 3 shows such a table:

<b>I</b>	<b>already</b>	<b>finish cleaning</b>	<b>+</b>
<b>you</b>			
<b>he</b>	<b>still</b>	<b>do (one's) homework</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>she</b>			
<b>we</b>	<b>yet</b>	<b>have dinner</b>	<b>?</b>
<b>they</b>			

Figure 3: Drill table with adverbs



Now it becomes more challenging, because the position of the adverb varies, and there's even a possessive form that needs to be conjugated as well. This one can be useful even at upper intermediate level. For example, what sentences would you elicit if you pointed at these combinations?

I / already / finish cleaning / +  
 we / still / do (one's) homework / -  
 you / yet / have dinner / ?

See below for the answers. Note you may need to move the adverb!

You can also use drill tables with many other types of grammar. Here's one for comparatives:

I	tall	I	+
you	old	you	
he	happy	he	-
she	sociable	she	
we	hard-working	we	?
they	quiet	they	

Figure 4: Comparative drill table

If you selected: I / hard-working / they / + , the sentence would be: "I'm more hard-working than them." Notice how 'than' is not included, so students have to remember it.

### Aren't drills old-fashioned?

Drilling is indeed out of fashion at the moment, but in small doses most experienced teachers find drills useful, especially with new verb forms that are long and complex. While little recent research has focused on their use, drills are likely to be useful in helping learners to develop phonological memory capacity and speed. Phonological memory is known to be an important aspect of working memory (Hummel & French 2010), which has been shown to correlate well with higher language learning aptitude (McLaughlin 1995). Drills can also help learners to automate structures to be able to use the language with more confidence in the future (Ellis 2007), which I think drill tables can really help with.

### References

- Ellis, N. C. (2007) "The weak interface, consciousness and form-focused instruction: mind the doors" in Fotos, S. and H. Hossein (eds.): *Form-focused Instruction and Teacher Education: Studies in Honour of Rod Ellis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 17-34.
- Hummel, K. M. & L. M. French. (2010). "Phonological Memory and Implications for the Second Language Classroom" *The Canadian Modern Language Review / La revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 66/3, 371-391.
- McLaughlin, B. (1995) Aptitude from an information-processing perspective. *Language Testing*, 12, 370-387.

### Answers:

- "I've already finished cleaning."  
 "We still haven't done our homework."  
 "Have you had dinner yet?"

