

# Practice in Different Phases of Learning

Chandra Viswanathan

How do we learn new things? Many of us think that learning begins at school. We say that ‘children come to school to learn’. The truth is that children have been learning from the time they were born. Over the past several decades, neuroscience research has established that the brain learns by constantly rewiring itself – giving up redundant connections that are not used frequently, while strengthening the connections that we access often. This happens to a very large extent in childhood, when our brains are most receptive to learning.

The study and research of the human brain tells us that to learn and master any new concept, we need to repeatedly encounter and apply it in many different formats. This is the reason that different formats of practice, as well as the right frequency of practice, are critical to learning and mastering a skill. In this article, we discuss some examples of how we can design our classroom activities to provide the right practice for wholesome learning.

## Practice in the three phases of learning

Learning a new skill involves three main phases – concept understanding, skill development, and application. In each of these phases, a different kind of practice is needed. Our job as teachers is to ensure that at every phase, children are engaged, focused, and overcome specific gaps, while retaining the excitement and momentum to move forward to the next phase.

Let us take the example of a simple skill related to English comprehension – learning to comprehend and answer questions on a passage. (In this example, we are assuming that many children in our schools learn English as a second language, without much exposure to the language at home.) What are the kinds of practice formats that we can offer children at each learning phase so that they understand the concept and master this skill?

### Phase 1: Concept understanding

Usually, we introduce children to reading comprehension by giving them a whole story to read and then asking them to answer questions at the end of it. For children who are just getting used to a new language, it is very difficult to decode, understand and remember a whole story and then answer questions from it. In this approach, the child has no way of comparing or recognising patterns in different types of questions.

Instead, we could break down the problem to first introduce the concept of ‘sentence comprehension’. This helps children understand the meaning of question words, compare them, and categorise the response to each question word.

Example Sentence 1: In the evening, Ajay went to the park to play.

First, write down questions with a different question word in each, and underline the response word or set of words in each answer.

Question	Response	Response in a sentence
<b>Who</b> went to the park?	Ajay	<b>Ajay</b> went to the park.
<b>Where</b> did Ajay go?	the park	Ajay went to <b>the park</b> .
<b>When</b> did Ajay go to the park?	in the evening	Ajay went to the park <b>in the evening</b> .
<b>Why</b> did Ajay go to the park?	to play	Ajay went to the park <b>to play</b> .

Example Sentence 2: Kamala goes to the market in the morning to buy vegetables.

Then, give the children another similar sentence and ask them to make the table again.

Question	Response	Response in a sentence
<b>Who</b> goes to the market?	Kamala	<b>Kamala</b> goes to the market.
<b>Where</b> does Kamala go?	the market	Kamala goes to <b>the market</b> .
<b>When</b> does Kamala go to the market?	in the morning	Kamala goes to the market <b>in the morning</b> .
<b>Why</b> does Kamala go to the market?	to buy vegetables	Kamal goes to the market <b>to buy vegetables</b> .

Ask the children to compare the responses in the two tables and come up with a category of response for each question word. Help them make a Question Word Table:

Question Word	Response Category
Who	person
Where	place
When	time
Why	reason

The concept understanding phase of learning involves analysis, pattern recognition and comparison. In this example, the practice activities prompt children to compare different question words and responses, figure out the pattern, and come up with the category of response on their own. When they do this repeatedly, with many simple sentences, they understand the meaning and difference between question words.

### Phase 2: Skill building

The skill-building phase involves mastery of specific techniques through practice in a variety of formats. In this example of building comprehension skills, specifically to answer questions accurately, we can introduce practice through a combination of different activities. A few examples are given here:

*Flip it: Write the question word for the response*

- Give children different answers with the response word(s) underlined. For each response, ask them to fill in the correct question word in the blank.

Q: \_\_\_\_\_ plays in the playground?

A: The children play in the playground at lunchtime.

Q: \_\_\_\_\_ do the children play at lunchtime?

A: The children play in the playground at lunchtime.

*Make your own questions*

In this activity, children only *make* questions – they need not worry about *answering* them. It is important to keep the focus on the question and not on the answer. This allows children to practise using question words in different contexts. It is best to do this activity in groups to build children’s confidence.

- Show children a picture. Ask them to make at least three questions of their own by looking at it. Allowing them to make mistakes in constructing the question is very important. It is NOT important for the question to be grammatically correct at this stage. We are only trying to help children understand and formulate questions with different question words.
- Give children a single sentence (without the picture). Once again, children must make three questions of their own from the same sentence.
- Give children a 3-line passage. Ask them to make five questions of their own from the passage.

*Talk time: Dialogue practice*

Once children have done a lot of practice making their own questions, we can try a dialogue activity to move them up a level. Divide the children into pairs for this activity. Give each pair a dialogue, with one of the questions missing. We can either give them options to make it easier or allow them to form their own question. Once they fill in the correct question, they can practice saying the lines to each other.

The practice for skill building does not mean doing the same thing over and over again. It means doing different things that lead to the same learning goal. In the process, we discover multiple routes

that lead to the same destination. Teaching each other, group discussions, role plays, and artistic expression – these are just some of the many ways of practising skill building.

**Vineet:** When is our English test?

**Usha:** It is on Friday.

**Vineet:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Usha:** Yes, I started studying for it last week.

Choose the correct option:

(A) Shall I start studying for it?

(B) Have you started preparing for it?

(C) Can you help me prepare for it?

### Phase 3: Application

To complete the phases of learning, children need to use the skills they have built in the classroom in different contexts and in real-world situations. This is an important step because it helps learners discover the relevance of the skill they are learning. In the context of our example of building comprehension skills to answer questions on a passage, we can get children to apply the skills that they have learnt by interviewing people around them. At school, they can interview teachers and each other, and record their responses.

To take English beyond the classroom, we introduce a *Walk 'n' Talk* activity that children engage in once they go home in the evening. They walk around their neighbourhood in small groups, interviewing adults by asking simple questions in English. In many of these communities, the adults would not know English. So, the children translate each question into their local language and teach their parents and other elders how to respond in English. This makes every child a 'teacher' and a proud one! Going beyond just application and practice, this activity also builds confidence in children.

### Practice at the right time

When should we introduce a practice session in each class? In the concept understanding phase, we need to interweave teaching and practice in short intervals. Let us say a teacher allocates the first 40 minutes of a one-hour class to introduce the topic, and the next 20 minutes for the children to practice what they have learnt. There is so much packed in

the 'teaching time' that it becomes impossible for children to recall or apply what they have learned during 'practice time'.

Instead, breaking down a one-hour class into short segments, and ensuring that every segment has, say, five minutes of teaching followed by five minutes of practice, makes each concept more tangible and relatable for the child.

In the skill-building phase, each practice activity must have a 'Do-and-Discuss' approach. Once children do the activity, the teacher leads a discussion around it. The discussion time is not just for explaining the correct answers. It is a key element of the class that allows the teacher to get feedback on the effectiveness of the practice activity, and to modify it if needed. It is the opportunity for us to discover which children in the class need more support at the same skill level, and which learners are ready to advance to the next.

It is not just the *right kind* of practice, but it is practice and feedback at the *right time*, that can enhance learning and ensure outcomes for all children.

### Back to basics: Practice of foundational skills

Several studies have established that a child's competence and confidence in the middle and high school years depends on the strength of foundational skills laid down in primary school. So, practising basic language and maths skills just for a designated time in a year is not enough. Foundational skills need continual practice for several years. Even as the syllabus introduces newer and more complex skills in each class, every school must have continuous back-to-basics practice sessions stitched into its timetable.

Many schools prioritise 'completion of portions' as children go to upper primary and middle school. However, if there are gaps in children's basic reading and arithmetic skills, the efforts made to achieve higher outcomes become redundant. Every school needs to plan how to allot the time available effectively, so that foundational skill practice goes on in parallel with grade-specific skill building.

### Building skills, building confidence

The goal of effective practice is to build the learner's confidence as they strive to achieve a skill. To do this, practice has to be at the right level. It must provide reassurance and challenge in the right proportion. It is our responsibility to search for enriching practice activities that lead to robust

learning for our children, while enhancing their curiosity and positive self-image.

A teacher's job is a hard one. Many of our ideas may fall flat, and only a few may succeed. Nevertheless,

it is important that we continue to search for the right methods that resonate best with the students; that keep alive in them the quest for real and deep learning.



Figure 1. Skill-building (phase 2), in which students are asked to form three questions after seeing a picture like this one.



Figure 2. Application (phase 3) in which children practise speaking English in the community.



**Chandra Viswanathan** is the Founder-Director of ELF Learning Solutions, an organisation dedicated to the mission of ensuring English skills for all, especially first-generation learners of English. The organisation has developed several innovative English learning materials that are being used by teachers and children in more than 200 schools. Chandra has over 20 years of experience in educational research, curriculum, training and implementing programmes in government schools. She is also a resource person and trainer on primary education for the SSA, Tamil Nadu government schools and several NGOs. She may be contacted at [chandra.aid@gmail.com](mailto:chandra.aid@gmail.com)