

USING SUBSTITUTION TABLES FOR LANGUAGE ANALYSIS WITH PRE-SERVICE NATIVE SPEAKING TRAINEES

I've had plenty of beginner and elementary classes who have been glad to have a substitution table either handed out or copied down or to work on as a reminder of the formal intricacies of whatever language points have come up during a lesson. I thus feel quite positive about substitution tables and tend to use them for two reasons when I'm with pre-service trainees who are native speakers of English.

- 1) Some language students really appreciate the tables.
- 2) They are a useful learning tool for the trainees themselves to find out more about syntax.

Initial Explanation

If you like to use a problem-solving start to input sessions, you can spray the board with many sentences that are similar in structure, e.g.

I like apples
I like pears
My friend likes apples
Sara likes bananas

Point out, while you're writing them up, how much duplication is involved in what you're doing and ask trainees if they can think of a way of avoiding writing the same words more than once.

Usually trainees will come up with a "ditto" system as in

" I like apples "
" " " pears "

which is the beginning of a substitution table. Just take out the ditto marks and add vertical lines. Then deal with the 3rd person singular and ask how it could be kept separate. Someone will suggest a horizontal line at which point you have arrived at the first substitution table.

Alternative Step One

If you like to start input sessions more by "telling" or "showing", you could put this on the board.

This This table This diagram What's on the board	is	a substitution table a series of columns something with structure something that can change its parts
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Step Two

Having now got the first substitution table into the room, you can ask people to read from left to right, to state which bits are the same and different, to name these bits e.g. "standard bits and variable bits" or "fixed bits and optional bits" or whatever name they come up with. Ask them to suggest other phrases or words that would fit into the different columns.

Step Three

Ask trainees to quickly make a substitution table with at least 3 sentences that start with "My brother (or sister or wife or husband or aunt or son etc.) is" Give people a chance to start and then go round helping where necessary.

Step Four

Next you can throw in the word "has" and ask trainees to work on where to put it and what to add. Similarly by calling out words, allowing thinking and writing time and then discussing and checking, trainees can learn what happens to their table when the following words are called out: "not", "my sisters", "older", "goes", "go on holiday", "often", "sometimes", "rarely", "does", "do", etc. Try to call out words that will cause trainees to think about plurals, verb agreement, adverbs, negatives, questions, adjectives, punctuation. At some point during the above, the suggestion will come up of having one table for statements (negative and affirmative) and one for questions. If it doesn't come up, raise it yourself. If people are coping well, you can call out a tag question e.g. "isn't she?" or a short answer "Yes, she is" but this will probably be too difficult for the first session. In my experience you cannot go slowly enough with this work. Native speakers are competent but often feel lost very quickly in formal analysis work.

Step Five

This could well be in a different session. It could also be an alternative to Step Four. Put trainees into pairs and ask them to work on the following task. The task is designed to give trainees practice in grouping like with like, adding horizontal lines, subject-verb agreement, remembering punctuation and word order. There will be a lot of rubbing out and re-drawing. This is what the task is for.

TASK SHEET

SUBSTITUTION TABLE EXERCISE

Look at the substitution table referred to previously. Then look at the following nine additions to the table. Put the additions in, one by one, making any necessary changes to the table as you go along. The number in brackets after each addition denotes the column it should go into. Use fresh paper as you need to.

1. a substitution table (2)
2. students (4)
3. punctuation (6)
4. not (?)
5. word order (6)
6. meaning (6)
7. after (7)
8. during lessons (7)
9. need planning (3)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Do	substitution tables	help	teachers	with	language	before	a lesson	?

Once all the words on the task sheet have been contained on the table, ask trainees to discuss the questions raised in the table. They may at this point realise that they haven't really noticed what the questions were! They've been so busy thinking about form and word order. This is a point worth making and relates to the question in the table about "meaning".

Other Steps

- ◆ You can ask trainees to find substitution tables in course books, state what they are practicing, point out the "fixed" and "variable" bits and add bits to them.
- ◆ As a 10 minute starter, break activity or filler you can (or trainees can) throw out a name of a structure (e.g. past simple, statements, all persons) and ask trainees to write a quick table for it.
- ◆ Badly written tables that don't read across or where lots of mistakes are possible, can be given to trainees for de-bugging.
- ◆ Ask trainees to come to the board and write comments about e.g. what they're going to do after the session. When there are plenty of comments up, ask trainees to hunt for similarities that could go into a table together.
- ◆ Taking a fully written in, duplicated substitution table as the "most controlled" form of a table, ask trainees how tables could be made "freer" and more creative. (See refs).
- ◆ Use a sentence stem in order to get feedback from trainees on aspects of the course. For example write up on the board:

"I find the course homework....."

or

"I thought the last input session was"

or

"When I first came onto the course I"

and ask all the trainees to come up and finish off the sentences as they like.
- ◆ Ask trainees to start writing substitution tables on their lesson plans as a way of working out, for themselves, the form of what they are teaching.
- ◆ Taking a basic sentence such as

“The roads in Townsville were jammed this morning”. Ask trainees

- a) which parts of the sentence could be represented by pictures and
- b) which parts could be fixed and which variable. (The answer to b) is that any part can be varied, it depends what the students are concentrating on at the time.)

Substitution tables look easy, when they're already made. Non-native speakers of English who have learnt English the hard way and have often seen substitution tables generally don't find them difficult. Native English speakers with no formal training as linguists or teachers find the formal syntactic structure of English an absolute mystery. At pre-service level there is generally very little ability to analyse, to see what is similar, to see what is different, to manipulate form. Working with substitution tables, often, only for short periods, is one way of learning about language.

References

You may like to look at:

Frank C. & M. Rinvoluceri (1983) Grammar in Action (p.77), Pergamon

Rinvoluceri, M. (1984) Grammar Games (p.56), CUP

Hubbard, P. et al (1988) A Training Course for EFL (p.67-69), OUP