

EXPLORATIONS

An Approach to Language Learning Review

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In my pre-intermediate English communication classes last semester, I noticed a troubling pattern: students could actively use new vocabulary and grammar during a lesson, for example, vocabulary quizzes and grammar exercises, but by the following week, much of it seemed to have vanished, specifically when it came to actually using it in the form of productive skills such as speaking and writing. As an English language teacher at a Japanese university, I work with students who are often balancing heavy academic schedules and part-time jobs, so their opportunities for out-of-class review are limited. For this reason, I began to ask myself: How can I help students retain more of what they learn without placing an unrealistic burden on their already busy schedules?

This question led me to explore research on memory retention in learning, particularly within the field of cognitive psychology. The “forgetting curve,” first identified by Ebbinghaus in the 19th century and later replicated by Murre and Dros (2015), illustrates how quickly information can be lost without review. While this concept is obviously well known, I was struck by how directly it mirrored what I was observing in my own classrooms. This observation motivated me to consider not only if review was happening, but how review was being carried out, and how it could be improved?

Rather than rely solely on rote memorization, which has its place, but often fails to engage learners, I became interested in how a combination of task-based learning (TBL) and task repetition might offer a more engaging way to reinforce lesson content. In addition, could TBL be a more effective method of supporting memory retention? According to Ellis (2017), TBL puts the emphasis on meaningful communication as the central focus of language learning, and encourages the integration of multiple skills, while repetition, when applied strategically, can strengthen both accuracy and fluency (Bozorgian & Kanani, 2017). Combining these approaches, I began to experiment with review activities designed to be interactive, motivating, and at the same time grounded in authentic communication where possible.

This paper is a reflection on that exploration. It begins with a brief overview of relevant research on memory and language learning, followed by a set of guidelines that emerged from connecting cognitive theory with classroom practice. It concludes with practical examples of review activities that integrate TBL principles and repetition, aiming to support long-term retention of lesson content in an EFL context like my own.

Theoretical Framework: Language Learning and Memory

This section examines how memory processes intersect with language learning, particularly in the areas of information processing, storage, and retrieval. In SLA research, the concepts of “information” and “retention” have been explored through various theoretical models and empirical studies, offering complementary perspectives on how learners internalize and recall language over time.

Definitions

Before turning to specific theories of memory, this section clarifies how the concepts of *information* and *retention* are understood in the context of language learning. *Information* refers to linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, and communicative patterns that learners must internalize to perform specific communicative tasks. This understanding reflects the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in which grammar and vocabulary are presented in context and directly linked to meaningful communicative use rather than taught in isolation (Richards, 2006).

Retention is the learner's ability to store new vocabulary in long-term memory and retrieve it for later use. It is also important to note that retention depends on the strength of the initial connection between a word's form and its meaning. Research suggests that the more deeply and meaningfully a word is processed, through activities that involve analysis, use, or contextual engagement, the more likely it is to be retained in long-term memory (Gablasova, 2014).

While these definitions establish what learners need to internalize and retain, the methods used to achieve this can vary widely in their effectiveness.

Why Rote Memorization Falls Short

One common but often limited approach is rote memorization. While rote memorization may have some benefit for short-term recall, it often fails to support communicative fluency. Nation (2013) points out that memorizing lists or isolated rules does not equip learners to use language flexibly and appropriately in real-world situations. In other words, knowing the language in the classroom rarely transfers smoothly into using the language outside the classroom if rote memorization is the only method of learning applied.

To address the limitations of rote learning, it is useful to examine what cognitive research reveals about how memory actually works in the context of language learning.

Cognitive Theories Supporting Retention

Ebbinghaus's classic forgetting curve illustrates how unreinforced memory decays rapidly shortly after learning. Contemporary replication studies confirm this pattern: the greatest amount of forgetting occurs soon after learning, particularly within the first 24 hours, after which the rate of loss slows but continues gradually over time (Murre & Dros, 2015). This highlights the need for timely and spaced reinforcement.

These cognitive principles are supported by a growing body of empirical research that explores how different review schedules affect language retention and fluency.

Distributed Practice and L2 Fluency

A recent empirical study with a randomized sample of 116 Japanese L2 learners compared the effects of short-spaced (1-day) and long-spaced (7-day) repetition intervals across four fluency training sessions (Kakitani & Kormos, 2024). Although the two groups followed different rates of fluency improvement during training, their performance on delayed post-tests, administered 7 days and 28 days later, revealed equivalent fluency gains. This outcome highlights the pedagogical strength of distributed practice in supporting lasting communicative gains in L2 learning contexts.

While these findings emphasize the importance of how learning is distributed over time, another crucial dimension involves the cognitive architecture that supports processing and storage.

Baddeley's Model of Working Memory

Baddeley's model divides working memory into the central executive, phonological loop, and visuo-spatial sketchpad, with a later addition of the episodic buffer (Baddeley, 2000). An understanding of this model helps to explain how learners process, store, and retrieve language information through different channels.

According to Baddeley (2000), at the core of working memory is the central executive, which acts like a control system, directing attention, deciding what information to prioritize, and coordinating the other components. The phonological loop deals with verbal and auditory information, such as spoken words or sounds, while the visuo-spatial sketchpad handles visual and spatial information, like images, shapes, and locations. The episodic buffer serves as a temporary storage space that integrates information from the other components and links it with long-term memory (Baddeley, 2000). This model explains how short-term mental processing relies on multiple specialized systems to manage different types of information and integrate them into long-term memory.

In language learning, working memory is particularly relevant, as it aids in maintaining and manipulating verbal information during complex tasks like speaking or listening (Unsworth & Engle, 2007). Stronger working memory, as stated by Miyake and Friedman (2012), correlates with better accuracy, lexical complexity, and fluency in oral production.

Beyond the structure of working memory itself, certain types of processing can further enhance retention.

Production Effect

One such phenomenon is the "production effect," which highlights the memory benefits of saying information aloud. It refers to the advantage gained in memory retention by saying information aloud versus reading silently. This dual-mode encoding, motor output plus self-auditory input, makes words more memorable (MacLeod et al., 2010). Research suggests that this additional processing step, which involves both speaking and hearing the information, leads to stronger memory retention. In other words, saying words out loud and hearing yourself at the same time helps you remember them better.

These cognitive insights provide a strong theoretical foundation for designing effective classroom practices.

Bridging to Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Task-Based Learning (TBL) offers a pedagogical framework that naturally incorporates these memory principles into communicative classroom activities. Spaced, meaningful repetition in TBL emphasizes the importance of meaningful tasks rather than mechanical drills. More specifically, TBL tasks typically cycle through three phases: input, where learners are exposed to new language; interaction, where they engage with others to negotiate meaning, ask questions, and clarify understanding; and output, where they produce language through speaking and writing. This cyclical structure supports distributed practice by spacing learning over time and across different contexts, which is essential for retention (Ellis, 2003).

Designing tasks that engage working memory can lead to deeper encoding and an enhanced capacity to store and remember a second language (Baddeley, 2000; Unsworth & Engle, 2007). TBL tasks are well suited to this because they require learners to hold and process language in real time, forcing them to actively store and manipulate information rather than passively receive it. For example, learners may need to recall a dialogue they have just read or heard, plan what to say in a role-play or conversation, or summarize a story in their own words

Production-based encoding plays a key role in TBL because the approach requires learners to use language actively through speaking and writing, thereby applying the production effect to strengthen retention (MacLeod et al., 2010). The output phase of TBL naturally involves this kind of active language use. For example, students may describe a picture, role-play a conversation, or write a short story or summary using new vocabulary and structures.

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that retention in language learning is shaped by both cognitive mechanisms and pedagogical design. By connecting these insights to classroom practice, we can create review activities that support deeper, longer-lasting learning.

Task-Based Learning and Task Repetition as Review Tools

Task-based learning (TBL) offers a pedagogical approach that aligns closely with principles of long-term learning discussed in the previous section. Rather than focusing solely on isolated grammar or vocabulary drills, TBL organizes learning around communicative tasks in which language forms are practiced and applied to achieve clear, meaningful outcomes. According to Ellis (2003), a well-constructed task typically includes three necessary elements: (1) an information gap, where learners need to exchange information to complete a task; (2) a choice of language resources, requiring learners to select vocabulary and grammar suited to the specific communicative purpose; and (3) a non-linguistic outcome, such as problem-solving, decision-making, or negotiation. These elements make TBL inherently interactive and purposeful, thus supporting learner motivation and, in turn, increasing the likelihood that new language will be internalized and effectively used.

In EFL contexts, fully authentic communicative situations may be challenging to replicate. Lynch and Maclean (2000) note that creating truly authentic contexts in the classroom can be difficult, however, adapting the principles of TBL within the constraints of the teaching environment can still provide significant benefits. When learners engage with tasks that require meaningful interaction, they are more likely to retrieve and apply previously learned language, strengthening both recall and functional use.

A further addition to TBL in the review context is the strategic use of *task repetition*. Bygate and Samuda (2005) define task repetition as having learners perform the same or similar tasks more than once, typically separated by an interval of time. It should also be pointed out that repetition is not equivalent to rote learning, rather, it offers learners an opportunity to refine their performance, increase fluency, and improve accuracy through increased familiarity with the demands of the task. Zaccaron (2019) expands on this by distinguishing between immediate and delayed repetition: immediate repetition consolidates newly acquired language forms, while delayed repetition strengthens long-term retention by prompting retrieval after a period of forgetting.

In relation to students' difficulty in recalling lesson content over time, the combination of TBL and task repetition offers a promising solution. TBL creates opportunities for learners to use target language in realistic, goal-oriented exchanges, while repetition ensures that the same language items are revisited in varied contexts at variable intervals. This dual approach not only encourages retrieval from memory but also fosters a sense of automaticity, or at least moves learners closer to fluent effortless use of the language. By maintaining higher levels of engagement through purposeful communication, these strategies help bridge the gap between initial learning and long-term retention.

Guidelines for Effective Review in EFL Contexts

The combination of cognitive principles, task-based learning, and task repetition provides a framework for designing review activities that go beyond rote memorization. Drawing from the

research discussed earlier and from my own classroom practice, three guidelines emerged for making review both effective and sustainable in EFL contexts such as Japanese universities.

Integrate Multiple Skills

Memory research that I explored indicates that information is more likely to be retained when it is processed through multiple channels (Baddeley, 2000; Kelly et al., 2022). In language learning, this means engaging learners in tasks that require speaking, listening, reading, and writing in combination, rather than in isolation. For example, a review task might involve listening to a peer's description (listening), taking notes (writing), and then reconstructing the description orally (speaking). This multimodal approach increases the number of retrieval pathways for the target language, making it easier for learners to recall and use it at a later date.

Make Review Interactive and Meaningful

As shown in studies on learner motivation (Miller & Unsworth, 2024) and the production effect (Kelly et al., 2022), active participation in learning tasks strengthens encoding and supports long-term recall. These findings imply that review activities may be more effective when they have a communicative purpose, rather than relying solely on mechanical repetition of drills. In my teaching context, incorporating elements of problem-solving, information gaps, and role-play helps students engage with the material at a deeper level, which increases both motivation and retention.

Use of Strategic Repetition

Revisiting the same or similar tasks at planned intervals reinforces language retention and promotes spontaneous recall (Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Zaccaron, 2019). Immediate repetition allows learners to consolidate new forms while the memory is still fresh, whereas delayed repetition requires retrieval after some forgetting has occurred, which strengthens long-term memory. In my classes, I have found that blending both timings of repetition, such as repeating a task later in the same lesson and again a week later, helps students move from tentative use of the language to more confident, fluent application.

By grounding review in these three principles, teachers can design classroom activities that actively promote retrieval, integrate multiple modalities, and maintain learner engagement. The following section will illustrate how these guidelines can be applied in practice through a series of adaptable classroom activities.

Review Task Examples

The following activities demonstrate how the guidelines outlined above can be applied in practice. Each is designed to promote retrieval, integrate skills, and sustain engagement while reinforcing lesson content. The activities described in this section are not theoretical exercises; they were implemented and refined in my own university EFL classrooms over the course of one semester. This practical experience shaped the guidelines and examples that follow.

1. Picture Recall (Speaking and Listening)

- **Guideline Link:** Integrate Multiple Skills; Make Review Interactive and Meaningful
- **Rationale:** Learners must recall and describe a picture using previously learned vocabulary and grammar, while a peer reconstructs the description. This multimodal exchange strengthens encoding by combining speaking, listening, and memory retrieval (Baddeley, 2000; Kelly et al., 2022).

- Procedure: Pair students. Student A describes a picture related to the lesson's target language and topic while Student B listens without seeing it. Student B then retells the description. Both check accuracy by looking at the picture together. Switch roles and repeat with a new image.
2. Picture Recall – Changing the Medium (Speaking, Listening, and Writing)
 - Guideline Link: Integrate Multiple Skills; Strategic Repetition
 - Rationale: Changing output mode from oral to written increases retrieval strength by engaging different memory pathways (Baddeley, 2000). The shift also introduces a form of repetition by requiring learners to reprocess the same content in a new modality.
 - Procedure: Student A describes a picture. Student B takes notes, then reconstructs the description orally and writes a short paragraph. Paragraphs can be posted on a shared board (e.g., Padlet) for peer review.
 3. Picture Recall – Time Limits (Speaking and Listening)
 - Guideline Link: Make Review Interactive and Meaningful; Strategic Repetition
 - Rationale: Gradually shortening the time available for each retelling (from 90 to 60 to 30 seconds) forces learners to focus on essential language and recall it more efficiently. This mirrors retrieval under real communicative pressure, which strengthens long-term recall (Bygate & Samuda, 2005).
 - Procedure: In groups of three, Student A describes a picture for 90 seconds, Student B retells it in 60 seconds, and Student C retells it in 30 seconds. Rotate roles and repeat with a different image.
 4. Picture Recall – Verb Tense Variation (Speaking and Writing)
 - Guideline Link: Integrate Multiple Skills; Strategic Repetition
 - Rationale: Revisiting the same content with different verb tenses creates repeated retrieval opportunities while expanding grammatical control. This builds both accuracy and fluency (Zaccaron, 2019).
 - Procedure: Describe the picture in the present tense. Then repeat in past and future tenses. Optionally, extend to a written version of each.
 5. Information Gap – Mystery Drawing (Speaking and Listening)
 - Guideline Link: Make Review Interactive and Meaningful
 - Rationale: Information gap tasks naturally stimulate negotiation of meaning, requiring learners to retrieve and use target vocabulary in real time (Ellis, 2003).
 - Procedure: One student describes a picture while the other draws it without looking at it. Provide the describer with a vocabulary list from the target lesson to ensure review of key terms.
 6. Class Mingle (Speaking, Listening, and Writing)
 - Guideline Link: Integrate Multiple Skills; Strategic Repetition
 - Rationale: Repeatedly asking and answering the same questions strengthens retrieval while the variety of partners adds fresh communicative contexts (Bygate & Samuda, 2005).
 - Procedure: Students circulate, asking the same set of review questions to multiple classmates, noting down answers. Optionally, compile responses into a brief written summary.
 7. Mini-Debates with Role Switching (Speaking)

- **Guideline Link:** Make Review Interactive and Meaningful; Strategic Repetition
- **Rationale:** Arguing both for and against an issue forces learners to retrieve and reorganize language multiple times, reinforcing both content and flexibility of use.
- **Procedure:** Students first argue in favor of a position, then against it, and finally from a neutral stance. Use topics related to the lesson content for maximum relevance.

From my experience of using the review tasks in a classroom setting, I discovered that each one had different outcomes and required adjustments. For example, review task 1 worked better with more scaffolding, such as writing the target vocabulary on the board and gradually erasing it as the students became more accustomed to the task. Likewise, in review task 2 students needed more support with developing note-taking skills, as many of them tried to write full sentences from the start, rather than keywords. In terms of feedback, students seemed to enjoy the time constraints of review task 3 and the challenge of changing tenses in review task 4. In contrast, and based on observing students' performances and engagement, review task 7 was too difficult for a pre-intermediate level class. It could work better with higher level students who have a more expansive access to the L2.

Conclusion

The challenge of helping learners retain lesson content over time is one that many teachers, both within and beyond EFL contexts, encounter on a daily basis, yet the solutions are not always straightforward. In my own teaching context at a Japanese university, observing students' difficulty in recalling material from previous lessons prompted a closer examination of how review activities could be made more effective. This exploration brought together cognitive perspectives on memory, the communicative principles of task-based learning (TBL), and the reinforcing potential of task repetition.

While each of these elements is well established in language teaching theory and practice, their integration offers a practical framework for addressing memory retention in EFL classrooms. The guidelines that emerged from this process: integrating multiple skills, making review interactive and meaningful, and using strategic repetition, are intended to be used as adaptable principles that teachers can shape to fit their own learners' needs and their specific teaching contexts.

The activities described here illustrate one way to utilize these guidelines and should not be considered the only way, as the use of the guidelines is open to interpretation. They aim to move beyond rote repetition, and instead engage learners in purposeful, multimodal tasks that require active retrieval and reprocessing of previously learned language. In doing so, they support memory by providing repeated opportunities to retrieve language, while also ensuring that practice takes place through meaningful, communicative interaction.

Overall, I strongly believe the review tasks were an effective method of supporting memory retention. However, it is unclear how effective. The next step in this exploration is to design a method of data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of the approach I have explored here.

Ultimately, this approach reflects an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice. It acknowledges the importance of established research while focusing its application on the realities of classroom teaching. This experience suggests that when review is treated not as an afterthought but as an integral, interactive part of the learning process, teachers can better help learners consolidate classroom learning and transfer it into long-term communicative ability.

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