

## Practice and Repetition in Second Language Learning: A Self-Study Experience from a pre-service ESL Language Teacher

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### Resumen

In language learning, the importance of practice and repetition is often forgotten. Frequently, language learners are not presented with a significant number of opportunities to repeat, and consequently, obtain an adequate command of lexical and grammatical elements of a second language. To conduct this study, Webb's (2007) and Webb and Nation's (2017) ideas concerning the effects of repetition in vocabulary learning were considered. This self-study research project will present the results of a longitudinal investigation carried out over eight months by a student in the BA in English language teaching at the University of Guanajuato. The student was enrolled in two German language learning classes and data were collected in a Sway portfolio, using reflective journal entries and visual evidence. The data analysis presents results showing that written practice and repetition of grammatical and lexical constituents of German contributed positively to the participant's second language learning. Written practice may have had such a positive effect on the participant's learning because this type of rehearsal promotes the activation of several mental processes (Field, 2003). Another relevant finding was that auditive repetition is essential in language learning and acquisition since it increases exposure to the target language; therefore, it promotes the effective retention of new information. This study has implications for language teaching and teachers, as it illustrates the necessity to supply strategies that foster practice and repetition of elements of a second language.

Palabras clave: written repetition, auditive repetition, lexical items, gramatical items, frequency of encounters.

### Introduction

It may be considered an obvious fact that learning a second language and other types of knowledge can be improved by repeating and practicing information. It is not a secret that individuals can become more skilled in one specific area if they are exposed to plenty of practice (Seliger, 1977). Practice is a critical factor that can contribute to the acquisition of elements of a second language; however, language students tend to overlook this vital feature of language learning and cover considerable amounts of information without substantial practice. In this self-study research, it is my intention to explain how practice and repetition influenced my learning of elements of German. I will begin by explaining the effects of written repetition and practice on my learning of German. In this section, I will recount how several teaching strategies that involved written practice impacted my learning. Next, I will discuss the repercussions of auditive repetition in my language learning process. I will also describe how multiple auditive learning strategies influenced the quantity of language elements that I learned. Finally, I will render a conclusion.

### Literature Review

#### Practice and Repetition

It is our belief that language teachers suppose that learners can acquire vocabulary and grammatical structures with limited practice, but this way of teaching may not allow sufficient exposure for students to internalize the new information presented in class. Webb (2007) conducted precise research related to the effects of repetition in vocabulary learning. He included 121 Japanese University students in this study who had been taking English classes for seven years. The results that he obtained were conclusive. Webb (2007) observed that "gains in all aspects of knowledge tended to increase as the number of presentations increased" (p. 59). The aspects of knowledge that Webb (2007) refers to are "vocabulary, knowledge of orthography, grammatical function, syntax, association, and meaning and form" (p. 46).

In addition to Webb (2007), Saragi et al. (1978) "conducted a landmark study revealing the important role of repetition for incidental vocabulary learning through reading. They found that native speakers of English needed to encounter target words at least ten times before substantial learning occurred" (as cited in Uchihara et al., 2019, p. 3). At this point,

it seems reasonable to explain the concept of incidental vocabulary learning. Uchihara et al. (2019) define incidental vocabulary learning as “the learning that emerges through a meaning-focused comprehension task in which learners are not told of an upcoming vocabulary test” (p. 3). Saragi’s findings can be pondered as substantially relevant, since one may be able to infer that repetition is a critical element for vocabulary acquisition for native speakers of a language and also for second language learners. Based on their observations, it becomes clear that Webb (2007) and Saragi et al. (1978) consider that incidental repetition of lexical items enhances their learning. This type of vocabulary repetition is undoubtedly effective; nevertheless, as Webb (2005) states, incidental vocabulary learning happens at a slower pace than intentional vocabulary learning. The later strategy to acquire vocabulary in a foreign tongue requires deliberate and conscious attention from learners; as a result, it may accelerate the language learning process.

Other scholars recognize the benefits of repetition and practice while learning a second language, although they believe that other aspects can significantly influence language learning as well. For instance, Ellis and Wulff (2020) mention, “While it is true that most usage-based approaches will discuss frequency as one of several factors, no usage-based theorist would claim that frequency is the only factor impacting L2 acquisition” (p.75). Webb and Nation (2017) also concur with the fact that despite its great relevance, frequency of encounters accounts for only one variable that influences vocabulary learning. Uchihara et al. (2019) conducted a metaanalytic study aimed to shed some light on the intricate relationship between repetition and L2 incidental vocabulary learning and determined that, “although frequency of encounters is an important predictor of incidental vocabulary learning, it is not a single determiner but one of many variables affecting vocabulary learning through meaning-focused input” (p. 31). It would be naive not to notice that repetition by itself does not guarantee the learning of a language; nevertheless, it is still contemplated as a factor that contributes positively to the acquisition of lexical items for native speakers and L2 learners. It is predominant to establish that Ellis and Wulff (2020) nor Webb and Nation (2017) or Uchihara et al. (2019) do not appear to have the intention to diminish the relevance of frequency and repetition of elements of a second language; they only mention that frequency is not the only factor influencing language learning.

## Research Methodology Qualitative Paradigm

For this longitudinal research investigation, over eight months, I worked with a qualitative research paradigm in which the data were “a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes. With qualitative data, one can preserve chronological flow, see which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 4). Pope et al. (2000) assert that: Qualitative research can produce vast amounts of data [...] Transcripts and notes are the raw data of the research. They provide a descriptive record of the research, but they cannot provide explanations. The researcher has to make sense of the data by sifting and interpreting them. (p. 114).

As explained by Denzin & Lincoln (2011) “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p. 3) where we studied the phenomena of language learning in its “natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). As a qualitative researcher, I used “an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Hence, my work includes my own voice as a participant, my reflexivity as a researcher, the description and interpretation of the phenomenon, as well as my contribution to the literature, and a call for transformation in my future teaching practice (Creswell, 2013).

## Self-Study Methodology

Within the qualitative paradigm, I employed a self-study research methodology in which teaching practitioners are the participants at the center of their research. As described by Bergh, Edge and Cameron-Standerford (2018) “to engage in self-study research is to not only study a puzzling educational phenomenon, but it is also to live research wholly as an even to study oneself and one’s own knowledge and assumptions in an ecological relationship with that phenomenon” (p. 116). Hence, as part of this self-study research, I learned a foreign language to better understand the learning process involved in my own language learning. This experience, in turn, will serve to help me as a language teacher practitioner to develop ‘wisdom of practice’ (Schulman & Wilson, 2004) or what van Manen (1991) calls ‘tact of teaching’ as mentioned by White and Jarvis (2019). The action to study the self as a language learner may prepare practitioners to acknowledge the challenges that their future language students may encounter. I employed a self-study methodology since my focus was to observe the different elements that could influence my own language learning process. This study was self-initiated and self-focused, and it was aimed to understand not only my learning practices but also my teaching practices (Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021).

Berry and Kitchen (2020) suggest that “self-study has important contributions to make in these times for documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical educational change” (p. 124). Therefore, it is my aim that this

research will contribute to my becoming a better and more critical language teacher, allowing me to understand the posture of my own students.

## Data Collection Instruments

To carry out the data collection process, I used three data collection instruments over eight months while taking German classes. More specifically, the instruments I utilized were weekly electronic journals, pre-provided and self-generated reflective questions, and a Sway E-portfolio where all the visual and written evidence was organized and kept together. According to Hiemstra (2001), "a learning journal typically is handwritten in a notebook or on a pad of paper as a means for recording thoughts, reflections, feelings, personal opinions, and even hopes or fears during an educational experience" (p. 20). Reflective questions can be described in terms of "their capacity to stimulate, or arise as the result of deliberation, introspection, and contemplation" (Malthouse et al., 2015, p. 2). Finally, "E-portfolios are valuable tools in learning and assessment procedures. The digitized form facilitates the documentation of the owner's learning, and understanding and better represents the owner's personality and achievements" (Doig, Illsley, McLuckie, & Parsons, 2006; Irvine & Barlow, 1998, as cited in Theodosiadou & Konstantinidis, 2015, p. 18).

To collect the data, every week I wrote entries in my reflective journal, and I uploaded that information to my e-portfolio of evidence, in which I depicted my learning experiences and processes to the best of my understanding. During the time this study was conducted, weekly reflective questions were implemented to gather information. In this case, reflective questions were helpful to promote deeper thinking about the learning practice. Those types of questions "can be formed through variance between formulations and expectations of experience and what is then perceived to have taken place" (Malthouse et al., 2015, p. 2). My journal served to reflect on the learning experience that took place during and after my language class. In the portfolio, I also included weekly evidence such as learning materials, photos of learning moments, autonomous learning activities from different technological applications that I utilized to learn German.

## Participant and Context

The participant in this research was one foreign language student involved in this research article as well as his university teacher. He was registered as a student in the classes "Foreign language learning II and I" in a BA TESL program called Licenciatura de la Enseñanza del Inglés at the Universidad de Guanajuato. The student participant is presently enrolled in a four-year BA in TESL program to become an English language teacher. This research took place over a time frame of eight months while the participant was studying a foreign language German class. The participant speaks Spanish as a first language and English as a second language, and he is considered a fully bilingual speaker of Spanish and English. The German foreign language class is his third language.

## Ethical Considerations

Being a self-study research project, as the participant concerned in this article, I did not sign a consent form, as this was my personal individual project throughout the duration of the study. However, because the data collection was carried out within a group setting, to protect the identity of other people, the results reported are only from me as the participant in this research. There is no data involving the language teachers or other classmates from the language classes that I completed.

## Procedure for Data Analysis

To work with the data that I collected, I, as a researcher, went over my e-portfolio, and I highlighted salient information that exhibited a potential connection with the topic of practice and repetition of a second language. The information in the e-portfolio was read as a first step of the analysis process. Then, I categorized the data obtained from my e-portfolio into three sections: written repetition, spoken repetition, and auditory repetition. Once I had condensed the most salient data pertaining to each section, the information was then reanalyzed to make sure the categories were accurate. On this occasion, the analysis was more detailed. During the findings and results stage of this study, the researcher went back and forth in his e-portfolio to make sure he did not miss any relevant information. Due to this study's qualitative and interpretive nature, there are significant possibilities that other learners and researchers may hold different points of view related to the findings and results that I present in this work.

## Results and Findings

### Written Repetition and Practice

This section will present data regarding written repetition and practice. In the following excerpts, I noted that written practice of grammatical and lexical elements of German was fundamental to increase my proficiency in the foreign language mentioned already.

"I have been completing fill-in-the-blank exercises that I consider of valuable assistance in order to learn grammar, morphology, and syntax. Reading my notes is another strategy that I use before I start a new session. As I already mentioned, my techniques might be old, but I think that they work for me since I strongly believe that planned repetition is a key element in language learning" (P1-J5- 04.03.2021).

"Practicing using written exercises has been really useful for my understanding of syntax. Sentences provide a form of tangible examples of how words fit together. Written language is great for me since it is not moving as it happens with spoken language. I can observe sentences for much more time, and consequently, figure out the patterns involved in their structure" (P1J3-15.02.2021).

Based on the extracts, it is clear that written practice of grammatical and lexical constituents of German contributed positively to my second language learning. Written practice may have had such a positive effect on my learning because this type of rehearsal promotes the activation of several mental processes (Field, 2003). For instance, when one writes exercises down, the "iconic memory" is activated. This memory allows us to grasp and memorize new words through the visual representation that letters provide to the brain (Field, 2003). It may be due to this iconic memory's extensive activation that written practice assisted me in learning more efficiently. Moreover, at the time of writing, electric impulses are sent to the writer's hand. These signals trigger muscular memory and generate additional brain stimuli, assisting the comprehension of new information (Warren, 2013). The electric impulses that the brain sends to the hand are registered by the working memory of the brain, and these connections may be combined with the input received from visual representations; consequently, the language information collected can be retained more effectively.

Notwithstanding the effectiveness of written repetition in my learning process, I must point out that on one occasion, I had to practice writing 49 fill-in-the-blank exercises related to how to express the time in German. Surprisingly, I seem to find this strategy beneficial even though it was originally contemplated as part of the grammar-translation method of teaching, which is considered outdated by contemporary scholars (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Fortunately, after that substantial amount of repetition, I was able to have a clearer understanding of the topic in question. The fact that I required 49 exercises to grasp how to express the time in German allowed me to realize that "The number of encounters necessary for substantial learning to take place varied to a large degree (Uchihara et al., 2019, p. 3).

Written practice and repetition exercises that included images were an effective way for mastering new lexical items. Research has shown that including visual aids in combination with written input improves vocabulary learning (Horst et al. 1998). Macwan (2015) establishes that "there are a range of types of visual learning aids used in language learning which use different media. Pictures are the simplest and commonly used. Pictures are very effective. Pictures provide associations for the learning of new words" (p. 93). The two abstracts that follow present my perception of the use of illustrations to practice vocabulary.

"This activity presented colorful pictures of common classroom vocabulary. I found it fun, so I did not even realize that I was repeating the same vocabulary. I think that learning vocabulary with picture representations is helpful for my language acquisition since I internalize new knowledge better" (P1-J4-14.09.2020).

"I will never get tired of learning vocabulary accompanied by pictures, since I think that being able to see a picture related to a word is a great way of activating my memory. Besides, receiving attractive visual input accompanied by auditory input is a much better way of processing information" (P1-J8-15.10.2020)

Determined from the excerpts above and the contributions made by Horst et al. (1998) and Macwan (2015), including visual representations to practice lexical items in class, or out of it, appears to be a worthwhile strategy. Images that appeared next to the written form of lexical items captured my attention; therefore, I needed to practice less in order to feel confident with my command of the vocabulary being learned.

Written repetition using only lists of items was the least productive way to learn new vocabulary, as I state it in the upcoming extract:

"I am not able to learn as many words as I would like to. I am presented with lists of new words in almost every class, but I think that I need more practice to be able to master as many of them as possible. I need to come up with a strategy to enhance my vocabulary learning" (P1-J706.10.2020).

Needless to mention, I will not assert that written practice using lists of items did not stimulate my learning. The issue was that by using plain lists of lexical items, more repetition was required; and consequently, I dedicated more time and effort to master vocabulary. From analyzing the information contained in the previous extract, I concluded that written repetition using only lists of lexical items, for my own learning process, was not an effective way to practice new vocabulary because it offered insufficient visual stimulation.

## Auditive Repetition

In the following extracts, I can note that auditive repetition has a critical role in learning and acquisition. Field (2003) tells us that humans possess an auditory store in their brains that deciphers information "in the form of 'echoes'" (Field, 2003, p. 18). This first store concerning the auditory section of the brain is called "echoic memory" (Field, 2003, p. 18). I believe that my language teacher's speaking of German repetitively promoted the activation of my echoic memory; as a result, I was able to comprehend and internalize grammatical and lexical components of German.

"My language professor uses common spoken expressions in the target language on a daily basis, and I find it extremely helpful due to the fact that the amount of repetition and exposure that I have been getting of German has dramatically increased" (P1-J3-16.02.2021)

As per this example, it is relevant to mention that auditive repetition is essential in language learning and acquisition since it increases exposure to the target language. The following written extract from my journal shows that "Frequency effects are readily explained [...] in terms of connection strengths. Each time a word is recognized, it is assumed that the strengths of the active connections are all incremented slightly" (Foster, 1990, as cited in Field 2003). "In this semester, I have noticed that my teacher's use of the target language in class has been rather beneficial to my foreign language learning. In this semester, I have perceived that the constant repetition of instructions, greetings, explanations, and general comments in the target language has contributed to the enhancement of my listening skills and also my speech production has benefited from this exposure to German" (P1-J9-12.04.21).

Derived from the examination of the last quote, I figured that auditive repetition of formulaic phrases was something that increased my learning; however, repetitive exposure to spoken lexical items and grammatical constructions only helped the internalization and automatization of the target language when I knew the written form of the utterances I heard. It appears that as I listen to utterances in German, I create an image of their written representation in my mind that enhances my comprehension.

Auditive repetition in the fashion of music videos was beneficial to my second language learning on account of the continuous repetition of the same lexical items and grammatical constructions contained within songs. This statement derives from the analysis of the subsequent extract. "The implementation of activities in class that involve music have made me really happy. Using music to review vocabulary related to the parts of the human body was engaging and fun. I was laughing when I was watching the video and listening to the appealing melody of the song. I watched the video 5 times, and I truly enjoyed it" (P1-J13-12.05.2021).



(P1-I1-12.05.2021) YouTube video on the human body.

Furthermore, I would infer from the last quote that engaging auditive repetition of elements of German was favorable to increase my effective retention of new information. In the same stream, using attractive language input strategies significantly diminished the effects of my language learning burden (Webb & Nation, 2017). "The learning burden of a word is the amount of effort required to learn it" (Swenson & West, 1934, as cited in Webb & Nation, 2017). "In other words, measuring the learning burden of a word involves measuring the difficulty that learners will have in learning it" (Webb & Nation, 2017, p. 35). During this study, I was able to notice that some lexical and grammatical elements of German posed different levels of learning burden. However, it is relevant to indicate that auditive repetition using songs appeared to reduce the learning burden; consequently, my language learning was fostered because I found music to be enjoyable.

## Conclusion

The constant practice and repetition of elements of a second language have proven to be beneficial to my language learning. Based on the findings obtained in this research study, it is likely that in future language courses that I will impart, I will develop strategies that allow students to encounter lexical/grammatical items of a foreign language several times. The benefits of using written repetition and auditive repetition as derived from this research work have expanded my understanding of why practice and repetition can promote language acquisition. In my particular experience as a language learner, I agree with the assertion made by Webb (2007), which states that “gains in all aspects of knowledge tended to increase as the number of presentations increased” (p. 59). During this study, I observed that my command of grammar rules and lexical items of German increased in a direct proportion to the number of occasions that I wrote or listened to the same elements. I need fewer repetitions of grammatical structures to understand them. Repetition of grammatical structures was helpful in my learning process. Derived from the findings presented in this research project, language teachers should be aware that presenting lexical and grammatical information only once is a teaching strategy that can be improved based on the benefits that practice and repetition can offer to language students. Language instructors should not assume that the information they present on limited occasions will stay in the students’ memory for an extended period of time, especially if the information they present lacks compelling visual or auditory stimuli. Students should be presented with opportunities to rehearse new information, so they can improve their learning of a second language.

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