Learners' Perceptions of Task Repetition: Distributed Practice Effects on Engagement and Metacognitive Judgement

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Abstract—This study delves into an underexplored area of language education, investigating how task repetition and distributed practice influence learners' engagement and metacognitive judgement in the context of English language learning in the United Kingdom. Utilizing a robust mixed-methods research design that includes surveys, think-aloud protocols, and semi-structured interviews, the study scrutinizes the experiences and perspectives of 150 English language learners. One of the key findings is the overwhelmingly positive perception of task repetition among the participants. Not only do learners believe that repeating tasks aids in consolidating their learning, but they also view it as a catalyst for increased language proficiency, thereby enriching their overall learning experience. Additionally, when contrasting distributed practice with massed practice, the study unveils a remarkable improvement in learners' engagement levels and their ability to make metacognitive judgments about their own learning process. This suggests that spacing task repetitions over intervals of time—rather than cramming them into one session—offers a more effective strategy for language instruction. Importantly, these findings carry significant implications for educators and curriculum designers. By taking into account the learners' favorable views on task repetition and the demonstrable benefits of distributed practice, educators have a compelling rationale to incorporate these elements into pedagogical planning and practice, with the ultimate aim of optimizing language learning outcomes.

Keywords—task repetition, distributed practice, learner engagement, metacognitive judgement, language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Task repetition is integral to language acquisition, contributing to language skill consolidation and refining learning processes (Bygate, 2001). It is based on the assumption that repetition allows learners to process language more deeply by allowing focus on form and meaning, enhancing fluency and accuracy (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Distributed practice, on the other hand, emphasises the temporal dimension of learning, positing that spreading learning activities over time enhances long-term retention more effectively than massed practice (Cepeda et al., 2006). These two constructs intersect in language pedagogy, shaping a complex learning landscape. According to cognitive load theory, learning is optimised when cognitive resources are appropriately managed (Sweller, 1988). Therefore, incorporating task repetition within a distributed practice framework could create an optimal learning environment by balancing the load between new input and consolidation phases. Learners' perceptions and attitudes towards task repetition influence their engagement and learning outcomes. From an ecological perspective, learners' attitudes are informed by their perceptions of the task's relevance, their personal learning styles, and the cultural learning norms they inhabit (van Lier, 2004). Studies indicate that while some learners appreciate the opportunity to correct and improve their performance, others may perceive repetition as redundant and boring (Lynch & Maclean, 2001). Understanding learners' attitudes is particularly pertinent in the case of English language learning in the United Kingdom, given its diverse learner population. Various factors such as the learner's first language, proficiency level, learning goals, and past learning experiences can influence their perception of task repetition (Ellis, 2003). The impact of distributed practice on learner engagement has been a significant focus of empirical research. The spacing effect, the observation that information is often better remembered if exposure to it is repeated over a long span of time rather than in a short one (Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913), is a central concept in distributed
practice. This effect facilitates learners to gradually construct knowledge, promoting engagement by reducing cognitive overload (Carpenter, Cepeda, Rohrer, Kang, & Pashler, 2012).

However, the role of learner characteristics and context cannot be overlooked. While distributed practice offers benefits, it also requires learners to self-regulate their learning and maintain engagement over extended periods. This can be challenging, particularly for learners with limited metacognitive skills or those in contexts where consistent, long-term engagement is difficult (Zimmerman, 2002). Metacognitive judgement, defined as learners' ability to assess their learning progress and adapt their strategies accordingly (Flavell, 1979), plays a crucial role in distributed practice. Learners with higher metacognitive skills are likely to reap more benefits from distributed practice as they can strategically plan, monitor, and adjust their learning process (Son & Kornell, 2008). On the contrary, learners with less developed metacognitive skills may find distributed practice challenging, as it requires the ability to manage time and learning resources effectively. In the context of English language learning in the UK, metacognitive judgement is particularly relevant due to the diversity of learners and the self-directed nature of much language learning outside the classroom (Benson, 2001). Task repetition and distributed practice offer valuable avenues to enhance language learning. However, learners' perceptions, engagement, and metacognitive judgement play crucial roles in shaping the effectiveness of these strategies. Future research should focus on how to tailor task repetition and distributed practice to individual learners' needs and contexts, considering these factors. Task repetition is an influential concept in second language acquisition. It relies on the notion of proceduralisation, a process by which learners convert explicit, declarative knowledge about language rules into implicit, procedural knowledge that can be used spontaneously in communication (DeKeyser, 2007). The goal of task repetition is not merely to repeat the same task verbatim, but to deepen understanding and automaticity each time the task is performed. This deep processing of information reinforces memory traces and forms robust mental representations (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

Task repetition provides learners with the opportunity to focus on language form and content simultaneously (Bygate, 2001). By repeating a task, learners are likely to reduce errors, increase their speed of response, and improve their fluency (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Notably, the effects of task repetition are not homogenous and may differ according to the task type, complexity, and learners' proficiency levels. For example, complex tasks involving higher-order thinking skills may benefit more from repetition than simple tasks (Robinson, 2001). Distributed practice, on the other hand, is grounded in the spacing effect - learning is more effective when study sessions are spread out over time rather than massed in one session (Cepeda et al., 2006). The underlying mechanism for the spacing effect remains a topic of debate. Some theories suggest that each spaced repetition prompts learners to retrieve previously learned material, strengthening memory (Karpicke & Roediger, 2007). Others posit that the spacing effect is caused by the variability of the learning context across different sessions, which enriches encoding and retrieval cues (Smith & Rothkopf, 1984). In language learning, distributed practice can manifest in various ways - spreading grammar lessons, vocabulary sessions, or task repetition over time. A notable consideration in the application of distributed practice is the optimal timing or "lag" between repetitions. Too short a lag may reduce the benefits of spacing, while too long a lag may result in forgetting (Cepeda et al., 2008). The optimal lag is likely to vary based on the complexity of the material and the learners' proficiency level. The combination of task repetition and distributed practice can significantly impact learner engagement. Task repetition can enhance engagement by fostering learners' sense of self-efficacy, especially when they observe improvement over repetitions (Bandura, 1997). Distributed practice can sustain engagement over time by reducing cognitive overload and creating manageable learning episodes (Carpenter et al., 2012).

However, the intersection of these strategies can present challenges. For instance, a prolonged time between task repetitions might lead to decreased motivation due to a perceived lack of progress. Thus, striking a balance between these strategies necessitates careful consideration of learners' individual characteristics and contexts. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the need for an individualised approach to the implementation of task repetition and distributed practice. Future research should explore how educators can tailor these strategies to cater to learners' perceptions, enhance engagement, and foster metacognitive judgement. In particular, digital technologies offer promising avenues for personalised language learning that adapts to individual learners' needs and preferences (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learning, a complex and intricate process, relies heavily on strategies such as task repetition and distributed practice. These strategies offer opportunities for learners to engage with language material repeatedly and over time, respectively. While their benefits are acknowledged, understanding their impact on learners' engagement
and metacognitive judgement warrants further exploration (Bygate, 2001; Cepeda et al., 2006; Rohrer, 2015; Serrano & Munoz, 2017).

1.2. Task Repetition in Language Learning

Task repetition offers learners the opportunity to engage with the same language material multiple times. Each repetition allows learners to refine their performance and consolidate their knowledge, leading to improved fluency, accuracy, and complexity of language use (Bygate, 2001; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). This improvement arises from the reduction in cognitive load and the ability to focus on form and meaning simultaneously. Researchers have reported enhanced language proficiency stemming from task repetition. Bygate (2001) observed improvements in oral narratives’ fluency and complexity upon task repetition. In a similar vein, Samuda and Bygate (2008) reported improvements in grammatical accuracy. These positive outcomes suggest that task repetition aids in internalising language knowledge, fostering language proficiency. However, factors like task type, complexity, and learners' proficiency level can influence task repetition outcomes. Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) found that complex tasks and high-proficiency learners benefitted more from task repetition. These findings imply that a nuanced understanding of task repetition is essential to maximise its effectiveness.

2.2. Learners' Perceptions of Task Repetition

Learners' perceptions and attitudes towards learning strategies can significantly impact their engagement and learning outcomes (Dornyei, 2001). However, learners' perceptions of task repetition have often been overlooked in research. Studies exploring this aspect have reported mixed findings. Lynch and Maclean (2001) found that while some learners appreciated the opportunity to refine their performance, others perceived task repetition as monotonous and uninteresting. Such contrasting perceptions highlight the need for a more individualised approach to implementing task repetition, taking into account learners' preferences and attitudes. Distributed practice, a strategy that spaces learning activities over time, is grounded in the spacing effect, suggesting that spaced learning results in better retention than massed learning (Cepeda et al., 2006; Rohrer, 2015; Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913). Serrano and Munoz (2017) found that distributed practice led to improved vocabulary learning compared to massed practice. The implication here is that distributed practice fosters long-term retention of language material, potentially enhancing overall language proficiency.

3.2. Learners' Engagement and Metacognitive Judgement in Distributed Practice

Understanding how distributed practice impacts learners' engagement and metacognitive judgement is essential, as it involves prolonged and self-regulated learning. Engagement in a learning context refers to the level of attention, curiosity, and interest that learners demonstrate (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). On the other hand, metacognitive judgement involves learners' ability to evaluate their understanding and regulate their learning accordingly (Flavell, 1979). Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of distributed practice, research exploring its influence on learners' engagement and metacognitive judgement is sparse. Future research needs to explore these aspects to provide a comprehensive understanding of how distributed practice influences the language learning process. Both task repetition and distributed practice have been recognised as effective language learning strategies. However, understanding the impact of these strategies on learners' engagement and metacognitive judgement needs further exploration. Future research should focus on how these strategies can be tailored to individual learners, accounting for diverse needs and preferences, to enhance language learning outcomes.

3. Methodology

1.3. Research Design

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This research design was selected due to its strength in providing a comprehensive understanding of the research question. While the quantitative approach offered a way to gather numerical data that could be statistically analyzed, the qualitative approach provided nuanced insights into learners' experiences and perspectives, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2003).

2.3. Participants

The participants in this study were 150 English language learners based in the United Kingdom. They were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation of various learner profiles in terms of age, proficiency level, and educational background. The sample consisted of both male and female learners, with ages...
ranging from 16 to 40 years old. Their proficiency levels varied from beginner to advanced, and they were students from different educational institutions, including high schools, colleges, and universities.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using three primary methods: surveys, think-aloud protocols during language tasks, and semi-structured interviews.

Surveys: Participants were asked to complete a survey that gathered quantitative data on their experiences with task repetition and distributed practice. The survey included Likert scale items related to learners' engagement, metacognitive judgement, perceived benefits, and challenges of these strategies. The survey was designed to ensure reliability and validity, with items constructed based on the existing literature (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

Think-aloud Protocols: To capture learners' thought processes during language tasks, think-aloud protocols were employed. This involved participants verbalizing their thoughts while performing language tasks, providing real-time insights into how they engage with task repetition and distributed practice. This qualitative data provided context to the quantitative data collected through the survey (Ericsson & Simon, 1993).

Semi-structured Interviews: Post-task, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore learners' perceptions in-depth. Questions were designed to allow participants to reflect on their experiences with task repetition and distributed practice, their perceived benefits and challenges, and how they believed these strategies influenced their engagement and metacognitive judgement. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The combination of these methods allowed for triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study provided a comprehensive understanding of the learners' perspectives on task repetition and distributed practice. The responses from the survey, think-aloud protocols, and interviews consistently indicated learners' positive perceptions of both task repetition and distributed practice in the English language learning context.

Table 1 illustrates the overall positive reception of task repetition among the learners. On a 5-point Likert scale, participants agreed that task repetition played a significant role in solidifying their learning (M=4.2, SD=0.71) and enhancing their language proficiency (M=4.1, SD=0.68). This was reflected in the qualitative data from the think-aloud protocols and interviews, where learners frequently mentioned increased familiarity with language tasks (M=4.0, SD=0.66), reduced cognitive load (M=4.3, SD=0.60), and improved performance (M=4.1, SD=0.62) as major benefits associated with task repetition.

Simultaneously, Table 2 presents the findings related to distributed practice. Overall, learners reported that spreading task repetitions over time resulted in significant improvements in their engagement (M=4.3, SD=0.62) and metacognitive judgement (M=4.4, SD=0.59). Learners also reported that distributed practice helped maintain their interest (M=4.2, SD=0.63) and prevent cognitive fatigue (M=4.1, SD=0.70). These findings corroborate with qualitative insights from the interviews, where learners often highlighted the positive impact of distributed practice on their ability to plan (M=4.3, SD=0.68), monitor (M=4.3, SD=0.69), and evaluate their learning (M=4.2, SD=0.71), suggesting a strong influence on their metacognitive skills.

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Solidification of Learning</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement of Proficiency</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familiarity with Tasks</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduction in Cognitive Load</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement in Performance</td>
<td>4.1</td>
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</table>
Enhancement of Metacognitive Judgement 4.4 0.59
Maintenance of Interest 4.2 0.63
Prevention of Cognitive Fatigue 4.1 0.70
Improvement in Planning 4.3 0.68
Improvement in Monitoring 4.3 0.69
Improvement in Evaluation 4.2 0.71

These findings offer robust support for the perceived benefits of both task repetition and distributed practice among English language learners. This perspective complements previous research in cognitive psychology and applied linguistics, emphasizing the practical significance of these strategies in real-world language learning environments. Further qualitative examination of the think-aloud protocols and interviews will help provide a richer understanding of these perceptions.

5. Discussion

The discussion section of any study is where the results are interpreted and linked back to the literature reviewed at the outset of the research. In our study, we sought to explore English language learners' perceptions of task repetition and the impact of distributed practice on engagement and metacognitive judgement. The findings indicate a positive perception of both task repetition and distributed practice, suggesting their potential as effective strategies in language learning pedagogy. In line with previous literature, task repetition was found to be positively perceived by learners (Bygate, 2001; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). According to the mean scores presented in Table 1, the learners acknowledged that task repetition significantly contributed to the solidification of their learning (M=4.2, SD=0.71) and the enhancement of their language proficiency (M=4.1, SD=0.68). These findings align with the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), which posits that interaction, particularly repetition, aids in the internalization of language rules, facilitating more proficient language use. This pattern of response suggests that task repetition offers learners the chance to repeat, refine, and consolidate their language skills, thereby fostering their proficiency. Furthermore, task repetition contributed to an increased familiarity with the language tasks (M=4.0, SD=0.66), a reduced cognitive load (M=4.3, SD=0.60), and improved performance (M=4.1, SD=0.62). This supports Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory, which posits that a reduction in cognitive load can improve learning efficiency. As learners repeat tasks, they become more familiar with the task structure and content, which reduces the cognitive demands of the task, enabling them to focus more on language form and meaning, ultimately enhancing their language performance. While the positive impact of task repetition on language learning has been widely acknowledged, our study brings a unique contribution by shedding light on learners' perceptions of this strategy. Understanding these perceptions is essential because it provides insights into the learners' experiences, their perceived benefits, and the potential challenges of implementing task repetition, which can guide educators in making pedagogical decisions. The findings also revealed the effectiveness of distributed practice in improving learners' engagement and metacognitive judgement. Learners reported that spreading task repetitions over time led to significant improvements in their engagement (M=4.3, SD=0.62), maintained their interest (M=4.2, SD=0.63), and prevented cognitive fatigue (M=4.1, SD=0.70). These results echo the work of Cepeda et al. (2006) and Rohrer (2015) who have extensively studied the benefits of distributed practice over massed practice. The benefits of avoiding cognitive fatigue and maintaining interest are critical in language learning, as they can significantly influence learners' motivation and engagement, which are key factors in language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

More importantly, learners reported that distributed practice enhanced their metacognitive judgement. They noted improvements in their ability to plan (M=4.3, SD=0.68), monitor (M=4.3, SD=0.69), and evaluate their learning (M=4.2, SD=0.71). These findings underscore the role of distributed practice in promoting metacognitive skills. Metacognition, often described as 'thinking about thinking,' involves the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's learning, and it has been associated with improved language learning outcomes (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Our findings suggest that distributed practice can serve as a pedagogical tool to promote metacognitive judgement in language learners.

The results of this study indicate that both task repetition and distributed practice are positively perceived by English language learners. These strategies contribute to the solidification of learning, enhance language proficiency, improve engagement, and foster metacognitive skills. Our findings provide empirical support for the integration of task repetition and distributed practice in English language teaching and learning. However, as with any study, ours is not without limitations. The sample consisted of English language learners in the United Kingdom.
only, thus, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts or language learners with different linguistic backgrounds. Further research could explore these strategies across different learning contexts and with learners of different proficiency levels. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term effects of task repetition and distributed practice on language learning outcomes. Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature by providing insights into learners' perceptions of task repetition and distributed practice and by highlighting their potential as effective strategies for enhancing language learning.

6. CONCLUSION

This study brings to light the critical role that task repetition and distributed practice play in the optimization of language learning outcomes. It emphasizes the dual advantage of these pedagogical techniques: First, task repetition enhances not just mechanical learning but also fosters a more positive perception among learners, making the learning process more engaging and effective. Second, the benefits of distributed practice go beyond mere content retention; they also contribute to improved metacognitive judgment, helping learners better gauge their understanding and progress. By doing so, the study serves as a clarion call for language educators to rethink and potentially restructure their teaching methods, keeping these two factors at the forefront of curriculum planning. Moreover, the study invites further scholarly investigation in varied linguistic settings and with an assortment of language tasks to validate these findings comprehensively and adapt them to different teaching and learning scenarios.

References


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