# A case for iterative practice: Learner voices

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What is the status of task repetition in English oral communication classrooms? Proponents of communicative language teaching (CLT) value learners' involvement in meaningful, enjoyable, and real (or quasi-real) communication and encourage students to practice language in student-student interaction. Most notably, in task-based language teaching (TBLT), learners carry out specific tasks with "less-structured input" and engage in "less-constrained practice" of language (Hughes, 2011, p. 151). The trends clearly show that both teachers and researchers have come to believe that practicing communication in interaction, or in negotiation of meaning inherent in interaction, promotes L2 oral/aural language development. DeKeyser (2007) expressed the need simply and nicely as follows: "a large amount of practice is required" (p. 293). However, empirical studies on repetition of the same or similar activities or tasks are rather rare.

This seems a little odd because practice entails repetition in our daily life. Did you not practice riding a bicycle for hours, days, or weeks? Small children practice using cutlery at every meal. Swimmers are not born as swimmers—they become good swimmers after long hours of practice. Why do language-teaching practitioners avoid deliberate, repetitive practice? Do they think that people will think of them as lazy or incompetent teachers if they repeat the same activities or tasks? For example, why do L2 researchers who are concerned with proceduralization and automatization not investigate the issue in relation to designing tasks or planning lessons and courses? Researchers informed about socio-cultural theories of SLA have also not explored the benefits/downsides of task repetition, even though they are concerned with the social nature of student-student interaction and effective scaffolding among learners. There seems to be a discrepancy between SLA and other types of activities when it comes to learning to be fully competent in specific skills (Beglar & Nemoto, 2012).

In this paper, I explore the affective reactions of L2 learners of English who are engaged in iterative tasks. The data are focused essays in the preliminary study and interviews in the main study.

The term "practice" has not been popular in language classrooms since behaviourism went out of fashion. In this paper, however, I examined learners' feedback on task repetition in order to promote the idea as an aid while learning to communicate in another language. Sixty Japanese students of English reflected on their classroom practice of oral interaction and produced focused essays on it. In the subsequent main study, to investigate further one of the most common themes identified in the students' essays, task repetition, I interviewed three students and asked them what they thought of the iterative, interactive tasks I regularly employed in class. Their interview data provided support for repeated practice with more enjoyment, higher involvement, higher self-esteem, and lower anxiety. Repeated practice was supported not just by learning gains, as past research had demonstrated, but also by affective gains as this group of learners made a case for it.

「練習」は行動主義の衰退に伴って語学の授業では人気を失ってしまったようだが、学習者は繰り返すことをどのように考えているだろうか。本論では、まず60人の学習者にオーラル・コミュニケーションの授業で行う「繰り返し練習」について意見を求め、その後3人にインタビューを行った。学習者は、繰り返して練習することの楽しさ、参加度・自尊心の向上、逆に不安感の軽減などを挙げ、気持ちの面でも繰り返しが効果を持つことを語った。

Based on these data sets, I argue for recycling the same or similar tasks for building confidence and developing fluency in less stressful settings.

## Literature review

### Cognitive gains

Some researchers have investigated the cognitive effects of task repetition (Arevart & Nation, 1991; Bygate, 1996, 2001; Lynch & Maclean, 2001). For example, Bygate (1996), by investigating two oral performances of one learner with an interval of three days, examined whether repeating the same story-telling task made a positive difference in learner production. The learner viewed a short extract of a cartoon and narrated the story. Her second performance, although required unexpectedly, demonstrated improvement in accuracy. For example, she chose more appropriate words and expressions and used more inflected verb forms as well as more lexical verbs compared with her more frequent use of copula verbs in the first performance. These results were likely to indicate that she was better at monitoring the choice of expressions or grammatical features. The researcher concluded that the first performance played the role of conceptualizing and rehearsing ideas for her second performance.

With regard to the fluency-development effects of immediate repetition, Arevart and Nation (1991) examined 20 adult learners' improvement using the 4/3/2 technique, and they found a significant increase in the speed of delivery and a significant decrease in the frequency of hesitation. In this technique, students deliver the same narrative on a meaningful topic for three different partners in less and less time. The researchers demonstrated that fluency is trainable by letting learners immediately repeat the task under time pressure.

Lynch and Maclean (2001) explored immediate task repetition with different partners in an interactive task and found that learners improved in accuracy on grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary when performing a *poster carousel* task. Seven pairs of learners made a poster on a different research article and displayed their posters on the walls. At the following poster session, one of each pair took the role of a visitor who asked questions about each poster for 3 minutes, then moved to another poster and repeated the procedure. The other served as a host who took questions in front of their poster. In the second round, they changed roles and did the

same. Through repeating six times as a host and another six times as a visitor, learners improved their language abilities, although their improvement was not uniform: Different learners became better in different areas. Furthermore, learners themselves thought that they had improved. It is also notable that they developed the ability to self-correct, which seems to demonstrate that learners monitor their own online performance, a sign of higher-level use of their cognitive capacity. In general, the results indicated that repetition helped improve learners' interactive oral performance and metacognitive strategies.

### Affective gains?

The overall results of these studies supported pedagogical applications of task repetition, either immediate or after an interval, with favourable cognitive outcomes, but they provided little information about affective outcomes. As far as I know, Lynch and Maclean (2001) has been the only study to examine learners' perception of repetitive employment of the same task. How did the language learners/participants of the study perceive task repetition? Did they agree with the idea of practicing by repeating the same (or similar) tasks, or did they become bored even though their language production showed signs of language development? After decades of SLA research, researchers know that affect, or emotions, of language learners can act like a filter that can significantly influence language use and language learning (Dulay & Burt, 1977). In a comprehensive model of willingness to communicate by MacIntyre (2007), for example, both situational variables such as *desire to communicate with a specific person* and *state communicative self-confidence* and more stable variables such as *interpersonal motivation* and *intergroup attitudes*, are thought to influence learners' desire to initiate communication in L2. While cognitive outcomes alone demonstrated in the past studies on task repetition, teachers might not be fully reassured that task repetition is an effective and motivating procedure and thus be willing to incorporate it in their pedagogical repertoire.

In recommending employment of task recycling, Helgesen (2003) provided an array of pedagogical applications and asked whether and how students become convinced that task repetition is useful. His tentative answer was as follows:

> My experience tells me that, once you call the learners' attention to how much easier the task

was the second time, and how much more clearly they could share their ideas, the students don't take much convincing. They know their own progress when they see it. (p. 6)

Based on the past studies reviewed above (e.g., Bygate, 1996) and the insightful suggestions for teachers (Helgesen, 2003), in my communication classes I make frequent use of repetition. (I use *Scraps* for my textbook; Cullen & Mulvey, 2009.) In *repeated interview*, two students ask each other several pre-set questions and some additional original or follow-up questions on a topic such as hometown, music, books, travel, and food. Then, after a while, they exchange roles as interviewer and interviewee. The students repeat the procedure with different partners several times. In *repeated presentation*, students give presentations to different listeners. Repeated presentation is similar to the poster carousel but different in that the speakers first narrate on their topics while showing an A4-size paper with photos and drawings that help their presentation visually, and then they take questions from the listener. Another difference is that the presenter can have more than one listener in one session.

What do the learners think of these and other classroom tasks that take advantage of repetition? In the preliminary study (July 2012), in which 60 students in my communication classes (two intact groups of 30 non-English major, first-year university students) wrote focused essays on communication activities, 57 of them (95.0%) chose repeated interview and repeated presentation as their favourite activities. I coded their essays and found four notable themes: (1) enjoyment/excitement, (2) involvement/engagement, (3) self-esteem/confidence, and (4) anxiety/embarrassment. Categories were coded as they emerged from the data (Howitt & Cramer, 2000) and a colleague checked the coding. Typical statements in each category are listed below.

1. Enjoyment/excitement
   It was fun.
   I enjoyed it a lot.
2. Involvement/engagement
   I was immersed in the task.
   I was absorbed in interaction.
3. Self-esteem/confidence
   I could do it, I thought.
   I was proud of what little improvement I achieved.
4. Anxiety/embarrassment
   I was less anxious.
   I didn't have time for embarrassment because I was into the interaction.

The purpose of the main study is therefore to investigate in more detail the four themes in affective outcomes of iterative task employment.

## Methods

### Participants

The three interviewees for this study were chosen among the 60 students in the preliminary study for more input based on their notable responses in their essays: Kiyoka for enjoyment/excitement and involvement/engagement, Kazumi for self-esteem/confidence, and Nami for anxiety/embarrassment. However, all three referred to the other themes as well in their responses.

### Interview procedure

Participants were interviewed individually in my office for about half an hour each during lunch breaks on separate days in September 2012. I interviewed them in Japanese, transcribed the recordings, and translated them into English. (My colleague read the transcriptions for verification).

Each interview was conducted in order to let each participant expand on the statements in their essays and talk about some of the memorable moments that occurred during the classroom interactions. At the beginning of the interview, I read the parts of their essays that interested me, and I requested that they talk more about those particular statements. Then, I asked them to describe their learning experiences along with their affective reactions.

## Results and discussion

### Enjoyment/excitement

The students seemed to have developed interests and experienced joy in sharing information about themselves and learning about others when engaging in the repeated interview and repeated presentation tasks. In the preliminary study, eight students (13%) specifically wrote that they enjoyed the days of repeated presentation most, where that was all they did in one class, with different partners, with different

roles as presenters and listeners, and with some refinements in their language and the way they presented. One student, Kazumi, referred to this as follows:

I read some books and comic books my friends in class introduced in their presentation. Their presentations made me think that I'd like to read the books they recommended. They said, "Try it," and I did (laugh). One was the book I was interested in but haven't read yet, and others were entirely new.

The repeated interview and repeated presentation tasks provided a safe space to express themselves and to get to know each other. The visual aid helped the presenters to describe their themes, helped the listeners to understand what the presenters had to say, and helped both to maintain their motivation to engage in interaction. The joy was in communicating who they are, even though (or perhaps precisely because) their L2 ability was limited, which suggests that self-exploration though L2 tasks indicates a fruitful area for more investigation (Motohashi, 2012).

### Involvement/engagement

In her essay, Kiyoka referred to the benefits of communicating genuine out-of-class experiences and interests in order to become engaged in L2 learning tasks. She did not feel that repeating the same information was either painstaking or boring because she was sharing with her classmates what she had to say about herself. Every time she talked, she had a new listener who showed genuine interest in her talk. Her use of the word "genuine" interested me, so I asked her for an interview. In her interview, she said that attention was on what was said rather than on how well or badly it was said. However, I was worried that students might think repetition was boring, and so I asked Kiyoka about boredom.

Kiyoka: Every time I did it, I was engaged.

Interviewer: Haven't you experienced this kind of exchange of personal information in high school?

Kiyoka: No, not really. No.

Interviewer: Wasn't it boring? We went on doing it, on and on.

Kiyoka: Well, as a presenter I sometimes thought, "Not again!" You know, it's not easy (to communicate in English). However, my classmates were always good listeners. They nodded, showed genuine interest in my talk, and encouraged me, which made me think, "Okay, I'll do it again. I'll do it better."

Interviewer: What about your role as a listener?

Kiyoka: I never got bored. I was interested in their visual aids and talk.

Attentive listeners seemed to motivate the presenters to communicate in the L2, which indicates that this *listener* variable should be more extensively explored both in terms of repetition and in relation to willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007). Kiyoka also said that she forgot about time passing, which is one of the hallmarks of flow, the optimal experience of life, where people get completely immersed in the performance and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Her remark seems to indicate that task repetition did not create boredom.

### Self-esteem/confidence

In her essay, Kazumi emphasized the importance of repetition in relation to confidence building because her own improvement was observable to her as she repeated. I wanted her to elaborate on the improvement of her English communication skills, so I interviewed her. She said that *confidence* might not be the best word because it is too big a word, but she felt better about herself after repeating her presentation a few times. The more she repeated, she said, the more prepared she became. She knew what to say next, and this knowledge eased her cognitive load, so she felt reassured and confident. She also noticed that her classmates seemed to be less and less hesitant as they repeated.

Kauzmi: Everybody got better with less hesitation. Everybody became livelier and more confident. We appreciated our work. It's mutual.

Interviewer: What do you mean by "mutual?"

Kazumi: Our appreciation (of each other's contribution).

Another participant, Nami, also mentioned that she appreciated their mutual respect and that the appreciation and respect helped her keep going with confidence. One theory of self-esteem, socio-meter theory (Leary, Tambor,

Terdal, & Downs, 1995), states that self-esteem entails the need for respect from others, and it serves as a gauge of interpersonal relationships. When communicating in English through repeated interview and repeated presentation, Kazumi seems to have developed higher self-esteem thanks to support from her classmates, and repeated practice contributed to the positive beliefs in their capacity to perform the interactive task.

### Anxiety/embarrassment

Twenty-one students (35%) reported in their focused essay that they experienced a gradual decrease in anxiety and embarrassment, which is a predictable and favourable outcome of repeated practice. In her essay, Nami wrote that her mind-set shifted from feeling anxious and embarrassed in talking about herself to creating a new image about herself. Many other students wrote that they were anxious at the beginning because the task was challenging but that the anxiety gradually faded away to some extent when they repeated it. However, Nami was the only participant who described her experience as if she were speaking her lines in a play, so I chose her as a third interviewee. In her interview, she said that when answering questions or presenting she felt as if she was acting out herself because she was actually repeating almost the same things, which does not often happen in our everyday conversation in L1. She said somebody new was coming out because what she could say in English was limited when she had more to say in her L1.

| Interviewer: | Weren't you talking about yourself? |
|---|---|
| Nami: | Yes, I was, but it's just part of me, not all about me. |
| Interviewer: | So… |
| Nami: | So? |
| Interviewer: | So, are you *not* happy about talking about just part of you? |
| Nami: | It's okay because it's *part* of me, but what I could say was limited and I repeated the same things, so it was like acting or like playing a game. |

Identities are an emerging topic of significance in SLA (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), and the topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but

taking language practice as a game (Murphey, 1998) might be a useful strategy even for adult learners. This is an aspect that deserves an investigation in relation to useful practice. Games are inherently repeatable and fun for players to repeat.

### Concluding remarks

In this paper, I examined students' feedback on doing the same task more than once. Here, the task was not considered by the students to be mechanical or monotonous repetition without specific contexts or without agency involved, but rather they saw it as meaningful interaction situated in a classroom context involving unique individuals. They are learning English, but they are living their lives as college students in and outside of classrooms. Their language might have been primitive, but their language use in interaction was truly communicative. Thus, the repeated tasks constituted a socially organized learning activity, and their experience was rich in meaning: They seemed to be personally enjoying the repeated practice. It is noteworthy that their developing interpersonal relationships nurtured their favourable affective outcomes. Larsen-Freeman (2003) calls for task iteration for the purpose of designing effective activities that can take advantage of positive repetition effects on language development. This paper did not examine cognitive language development, so the next logical step is to investigate both cognitive and affective outcomes in a single longitudinal study.

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