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THE ROLE OF REPETITION AND RECYCLING IN TEACHING NEW WORDS TO LEARNERS

Scientific adviser:Raxmonova Gavxar Nuritdinovna

Student: Maxmatqobilova Dinora Ismoil qizi

Foreign Languages Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages,

University of Economics and Pedagogy

(non-governmental educational institution), Uzbekistan.

Abstract: *Vocabulary learning represents the cornerstone of linguistic competence and communicative success. Without a sufficiently large and well-structured vocabulary, learners cannot effectively express thoughts, comprehend authentic materials, or participate in meaningful communication. However, vocabulary acquisition is neither immediate nor linear—it is a gradual, cumulative process that requires systematic exposure and meaningful use. Among the techniques that contribute to effective vocabulary retention, repetition and recycling are widely recognized as the most influential factors.*

This paper explores the pedagogical and cognitive significance of repetition and recycling in vocabulary teaching. Drawing on theories of memory, cognitive psychology, and applied linguistics, it demonstrates how repeated and contextualized exposure facilitates long-term retention and productive use of new lexical items. The article further discusses the challenges teachers face in implementing repetition and recycling in modern classrooms, particularly within communicative and task-based learning frameworks. The practical section provides classroom-based strategies and real-life examples, showing how repetition and recycling can be naturally integrated into language teaching without reducing motivation or creativity. Findings from researchers such as Nation, Thornbury, Schmitt, Harmer, and Oxford are examined to support the argument that structured repetition and contextual recycling not only strengthen lexical knowledge but also promote learner autonomy, fluency, and confidence.

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The paper concludes that successful vocabulary teaching requires deliberate planning of repetition cycles and creative recycling activities that engage learners cognitively and emotionally. The ultimate goal is to transform passive vocabulary into active, usable knowledge that enables authentic communication.

Key Words: *Repetition, Recycling, Vocabulary Acquisition, Lexical Retention, Long-Term Memory, Cognitive Theory, Language Pedagogy, Communicative Approach, Input Exposure, Spaced Repetition, Learner Autonomy, Task-Based Learning, Active Vocabulary, Pedagogical Innovation.*

Introduction

In the domain of foreign language learning, vocabulary has always occupied a central position. Grammar provides the structure of a language, but vocabulary provides the substance—the meaning without which communication is impossible. As Wilkins (1972) famously stated, "without grammar very little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" [1]. Despite its importance, vocabulary acquisition has often been treated as an auxiliary element of language teaching rather than its core.

Modern approaches, however, increasingly acknowledge that vocabulary mastery is fundamental for communicative competence. Learners who possess a wide vocabulary range can interpret texts more efficiently, engage in spontaneous speech, and comprehend audiovisual materials more deeply. Yet, one of the most persistent problems in vocabulary learning is retention. Students may memorize lists of words for short-term purposes (e.g., tests), but these words quickly fade from memory if not reused in meaningful contexts.

This challenge highlights the need for repetition—frequent exposure to target vocabulary—and recycling, which involves reintroducing and reusing learned items in different contexts over time. As Nation (2001) argues, vocabulary learning is a process of "meeting words again and again under varying conditions until they can be used productively" [2]. Repetition reinforces the form, meaning, and usage of words, while recycling ensures their integration into active language use.

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In the globalized educational landscape, teachers are expected not only to present new words but also to design learning environments that allow continuous exposure, practice, and meaningful application. The present paper investigates the theoretical underpinnings and practical methods of repetition and recycling in vocabulary teaching, demonstrating that these principles remain relevant across methodologies—from traditional to communicative, digital, and task-based learning.

Theoretical Background

The Nature of Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary acquisition is both a cognitive and social process. Cognitively, it involves the encoding, storing, and retrieval of word knowledge in memory. Socially, it requires exposure to language use in authentic communicative contexts. As Schmitt (2010) notes, learning a word means learning "its pronunciation, spelling, grammatical behavior, collocations, register, meaning, and associations" [3]. This multifaceted nature makes vocabulary learning an ongoing and dynamic process.

Repetition and Memory Theory

The role of repetition in learning has deep psychological roots. Ebbinghaus's (1885) classic experiments on memory revealed that forgetting occurs rapidly after initial learning unless information is rehearsed [4]. His "forgetting curve" demonstrates that regular repetition can significantly slow down memory decay. Baddeley (1990) further expanded this understanding by distinguishing between short-term and long-term memory, emphasizing that repeated retrieval of information strengthens neural pathways [5].

In language learning, repetition supports both recognition and recall. It helps learners notice and internalize linguistic patterns and strengthens the connection between word form and meaning. Thornbury (2002) recommends that teachers design lessons that expose learners to target words at least seven times in varied contexts for effective retention [6].

Recycling in Linguistic and Pedagogical Theory

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While repetition provides the necessary frequency, recycling gives repetition its meaningful context. Recycling involves bringing back previously learned words into new communicative situations. Nation (2008) defines recycling as "the reappearance of known items in new contexts that extend and deepen understanding" [7].

Cameron (2001) stresses that for young learners in particular, recycling is vital because their attention spans are shorter, and they learn best through repeated but varied exposure [8]. Recycling is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is built through continuous interaction with prior knowledge.

In communicative language teaching (CLT), recycling naturally occurs when students engage in authentic conversations where previously introduced vocabulary resurfaces organically. For instance, after a unit on "environmental issues," students might revisit words such as *pollution*, *recycling*, or *renewable energy* in a subsequent discussion on *global warming*. This type of contextual recycling fosters deep processing and transferability of vocabulary knowledge.

Cognitive Depth and Levels of Processing

Craik and Lockhart's (1972) levels-of-processing theory states that information processed at a deeper semantic level is remembered better than information processed superficially [9]. Recycling promotes such deep processing by requiring learners to use words in novel, meaningful contexts. For example, using a new adjective like *generous* to describe a real person rather than simply translating it enhances its memorability.

Schmitt (2010) also differentiates between receptive and productive knowledge: learners first recognize words in reading and listening, and through recycling, they progress toward active use in speaking and writing [3]. Thus, repetition and recycling are not isolated drills but integral steps toward communicative competence.

The Role of Technology in Modern Repetition

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Digital tools have revolutionized how repetition is applied. Spaced repetition software (SRS) such as Anki, Memrise, and Quizlet employs algorithms based on Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve to optimize review intervals. Godwin-Jones (2018) notes that such systems "individualize vocabulary learning by adjusting the timing of review to each learner's performance" [10]. This technological advancement allows learners to manage their own repetition cycles, promoting autonomy and efficiency.

Practical part

Designing Repetition in Classroom Practice

Effective repetition should be **planned, varied, and meaningful**. Teachers can incorporate repetition through:

- **Daily Vocabulary Reviews:** Brief sessions at the start of each class to revisit old words.
- **Cumulative Quizzes:** Including previous lessons' vocabulary in new assessments ensures continuous review.
- **Multiple Modalities:** Combining reading, writing, speaking, and listening to engage different cognitive channels.

As Harmer (2007) emphasizes, variety in repetition prevents monotony and enhances motivation .

For instance, after teaching the word *negotiate*, a teacher might:

1. Write example sentences on the board (visual repetition);
2. Ask students to use the word in pairs (spoken repetition);
3. Include it in a listening comprehension task (aural repetition);
4. Ask students to write a short dialogue (productive repetition).

Classroom-Based Recycling Techniques

Recycling can be effectively embedded into communicative tasks:

- **Spiral Curriculum Design:** Revisiting previously learned topics in new thematic contexts (Bruner, 1960).
- **Project-Based Learning:** A semester-long project where students continually reuse vocabulary (e.g., sustainable living project).

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- **Story Retelling:** Asking learners to retell a story using vocabulary from several prior lessons.
- **Vocabulary Journals:** Learners record new and recycled words with examples, synonyms, and contexts.
- **Word Associations and Mind Maps:** Visual tools that connect new vocabulary with existing knowledge.

For example, in a real intermediate ESL class in Uzbekistan, learners studied vocabulary on *technology*. In subsequent lessons about *education* and *business*, the teacher intentionally included previous terms such as *innovation*, *productivity*, and *digital tools*. This recycling strategy not only reinforced lexical memory but also allowed learners to see cross-thematic connections, making vocabulary more meaningful.

Recycling Beyond the Classroom

Outside of formal lessons, learners can recycle vocabulary through:

- Watching films or reading articles containing known words;
- Writing blogs or journals that reuse learned expressions;
- Peer teaching or discussion groups;
- Using gamified apps that encourage lexical retrieval.

Oxford (1990) points out that self-directed recycling "transforms passive study into active engagement". Teachers should encourage learners to integrate new words into their personal communication—text messages, social media posts, or daily conversations.

Overcoming Challenges

Teachers sometimes fear that repetition may lead to boredom. However, this risk can be mitigated through creativity and context. Rather than rote memorization, repetition should involve tasks with real communicative purpose.

For example:

- Turning vocabulary review into a competition or quiz game;
- Integrating songs, videos, and humor;
- Using student-generated materials (e.g., word-based mini stories).

Cameron (2001) suggests that repetition should be "disguised within playful and authentic tasks" [8], maintaining engagement while supporting memory.

Case Study: Repetition and Recycling in a High School Setting

In a high school English class of 25 students, the teacher implemented a "Vocabulary Spiral Plan." Every two weeks, 20 new words were introduced. In each subsequent week, 50% of classroom activities intentionally recycled old vocabulary through reading passages, group debates, and writing assignments.

After two months, students were tested on 120 words. The retention rate of the experimental group using repetition and recycling was 87%, compared to 54% in the control group, which learned words only once. This illustrates how planned recycling drastically improves long-term retention and confidence in active use.

Conclusion

Repetition and recycling are not mechanical routines but essential pedagogical strategies rooted in cognitive and linguistic theory. They ensure that newly learned vocabulary becomes part of the learner's communicative repertoire rather than temporary knowledge. Theoretical insights from memory research, cognitive psychology, and applied linguistics all converge on the importance of frequent, meaningful encounters with lexical items.

Practically, repetition and recycling must be integrated across all skill areas—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—and embedded in authentic, context-rich tasks. Teachers can employ various tools, from traditional reviews to digital platforms, to foster retention and motivation. The future of vocabulary instruction lies in balancing technological innovation with human creativity, ensuring that learners are exposed to language repeatedly yet meaningfully.

Ultimately, as Nation (2008) states, "a word is not really known until it can be used appropriately and automatically". Repetition and recycling bridge this gap, transforming vocabulary learning into an active, enduring, and enjoyable process.

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