Series Editors' Preface

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Learning Language through Task Repetition
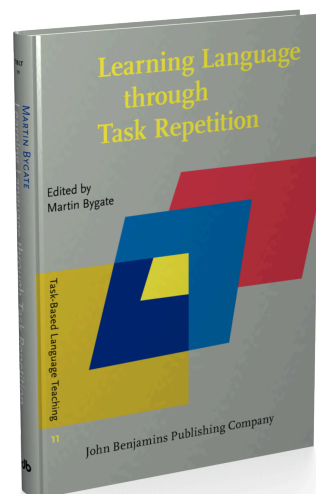**Edited by Martin Bygate**
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There is a lot of intuitive appeal to the idea that task repetition enhances development. When human beings try to acquire a complex skill (like riding a bike, driving a car, swimming, or delivering a keynote), their very first attempt is highly unlikely to be their best. To the contrary, when a complex task is repeated a number of times, chances are considerable that people gradually get better, especially when they are provided with interactional support and feedback, and/or reflect upon their own performance.

Paradoxically, this line of reasoning implies that there may be no such thing as exact task repetition. Even if students are set what is seemingly the very same task, their performance will not be identical to their previous one. As Martin Bygate makes clear in his excellent introduction to this volume, "task repetition" can refer to a lot of things, but it usually does not refer to the exact repetition of a particular performance of exactly the same task. For one, the task and its accompanying instructions are seldom identical across subsequent performances, even in studies that focus on the effects of task repetition. What needs to be repeated is usually some aspect of a particular task. For instance, after a first attempt at a directions-giving task, learners may be asked to give directions about the same route to another interlocutor, to perform the same task type but with a different destination, to perform the same task under more stressful conditions (e.g., under time pressure), and the like. Secondly, even if tasks (or parts of tasks) may be the same on paper, and so involve very similar instructions, from the moment people engage with tasks, variation is bound to occur. People, unlike machines, do not just copy and paste their communicative performances. In fact, for learning to happen, this is crucial: Learning, ultimately, is the result of variation and change.

Cognition-based research into learning processes provides substantial evidence for practice and repetition effects (cf. Hattie & Yates, 2014; Weinstein, Madan, & Sumeracki, 2018). For instance, there is robust empirical evidence for the impact of deliberate practice, distributed practice, and interleaving, all of which involve significant amounts of task repetition. Both storage strength (the extent to which a memory is truly embedded in the mind) and retrieval strength (the ease with which a memory can be retrieved) appear to be positively affected by task repetition in multiple ways. Interestingly, much of this research suggests that most authentic, real-life tasks

may be composed of multiple minitasks and involve a considerable host of subskills. Repetition, then, may allow students to automatize certain of these minitasks or subskills, freeing their mind to focus on another minitask or subskill during subsequent performances. Or task repetition may promote the fluent and effective integration of several of these minitasks into a more holistic performance. This is a fascinating thought that is taken up in several chapters of this volume, both from a theoretical and empirical perspective. It may actually shake up the whole concept of a task, which in many seminal articles on TBLT, tends to be treated as a one-dimensional unit, rather than a composite concept.

Equally fascinating is the thought that even if in subsequent performances some features of a task may be relatively stable, the interaction to which the task gives rise will strongly differ across performances. Particular types of interactional variations (such as the degree of scaffolding or modelling offered by a teacher, the feedback provided by the interlocutor, the types of questions that the L2 speaker is asked, and the specific output that the L2 speaker will produce during subsequent performances) may have a direct or indirect impact on the learning that results from the repeated task performance. The studies reported in this volume shed light on the complexity of the interplay between task repetition and the concomitant modification of output production and interactional support. Descriptions of task sequences, such as they tend to be produced in curricula or syllabi, may touch upon only a fragment of the many variables that are involved in the kind of sequencing of task performance that gives rise to language learning.

As much as there is to be learnt from the theoretical and empirical chapters in this volume with regard to handling task repetition in task-based language teaching, the volume also shows that we may have only just begun unravelling the wonders of task repetition. One crucial question is how we measure the progress students make across task repetitions, and what, ultimately, is the relationship between variation in performance and sustainable learning. If some learners are found to have produced slightly more complex sentences (from a syntactic point of view) in task performance 2, or have been found to produce a significantly slighter amount of hesitations (adding to their fluency scores), what exactly can these learners be said to have learnt? Would it require additional task performances to measure the true impact of task repetition on learning, and if so, would that subsequent task performance not constitute another hotspot for further learning? In addition, how much of what is truly learnt can be discerned using the methods and instruments that are typically employed in task repetition research? Do we need more sophisticated tools or more varied perspectives to document learners' progress in task-related behavior and the mental processing involved?

Finally, for all its richness, this volume contains chapters that approach task repetition from the perspective of one particular target language. However, most of the

tasks that second language learners are asked to perform are familiar to them in the sense that they have produced them (and may have performed them many times) in their L1 (or any other language that they use frequently). Both in the theory-making and the empirical research into task repetition, cross-linguistic influences may constitute another untapped, but potentially powerful, area of research.

As concluded by its editor, this volume on task repetition is overdue, and its content is clearly provocative for researchers and practitioners interested in the many nuances of this deceptively simple idea. There clearly is a need for much more research into this promising area, and this volume provides an excellent foundation for inspiring future work.

Kris Van den Branden
John M. Norris

References

Hattie, J., & Yates, G. (2014). *Visible learning and the science of how we learn*. New York: Routledge.

Weinstein, Y., Madan, C., & Sumeracki, M. (2018). Teaching the science of learning. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 3. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-017-0087-y

Andy Warhol

'I started repeating the same image because I like the way the repetition changed the same image.'
(from 'A conversation with Andy Warhol' by Gerard Malanga, in K.Goldsmith (ed.) 1971. I'll be your mirror: the selected Andy Warhol interviews. London: Hachette UK)

Ricky O'Bannon

'If you listen to music, you instinctively know that a song sounds different the tenth time you hear it from the first. Repetition is an often overlooked yet powerful part of the way we process music, whether that music is a classical symphony or that Taylor Swift song we just can't seem to get out of our head.'
https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/the-power-of-musical-repetition/

Margulis, E.M. (Director, Music Lab, University of Arkansas)

'Research has also shown that listeners shift their attention across musical repetitions, focusing on different aspects of the sound on each new listen. You might notice the melody of a phrase the first time, but when it is repeated your attention shifts to how a guitarist bends a pitch.'   'Why we love repetitions in music.' TEDEd Lessons worth sharing.

Graham Fitch

'The trick with repetitions [in learning a piece of music] is to focus the mind on something very specific, varying the focus with each repetition. If you are refining a tricky spot in a piece you have already learned, your brain should be consuming a lot of energy as you concentrate on what is necessary to edge the passage closer to where it needs to be, rather than simply hacking away at it hoping it will eventually yield (this requires far less concentration).'
http://www.practisingthepiano.com/how-to-manage-repetition-in-practice/

Pablo Casals

'It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life. I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day is something new, fantastic, unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle!'