

Ideas for integrating meaningful immediate repetition tasks in the English as an additional language classroom: promoting fluency

Rafael Zaccaron* 

* Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), Florianópolis, SC, Brazil.

ABSTRACT:

Although repetition is at the core of many different approaches to language learning, either implicitly or not, using this pedagogic practice in the additional language classroom is still negatively perceived by some teachers (Bygate and Samuda, 2005). For contemporary research, on the other hand, the use of repetition is not incongruous with communicative additional language teaching approaches that bring the use of tasks to the forefront. The use of immediate repeated tasks can benefit learners because it allows the possibility of repeating slightly altered tasks in a meaningful way. Bearing this in mind, this paper describes three immediate repetition tasks that focus on the speaking skill aiming at developing both fluency and accuracy. All are inherently suited for the additional language classroom and can be easily adapted to better suit specific contexts.

KEYWORDS: Task-based language teaching; task repetition; oral task; learner-learner interaction; English as an additional language.

Ideias para integrar a repetição imediata de tarefas de forma significativa na aula de inglês como língua adicional: promoção da fluência

RESUMO:

Embora a repetição seja parte central de diversas distintas abordagens no aprendizado de línguas, implicitamente ou não, o uso dessa prática pedagógica na aula de língua adicional ainda é percebido de forma negativa por alguns professores (Bygate e Samuda, 2005). Por outro lado, em pesquisas contemporâneas, o uso da repetição não é contrário às abordagens comunicativas de ensino de línguas adicionais que privilegiam o uso de tarefas. Usar tarefas com repetição imediata pode vir a beneficiar o/a aprendiz ao permitir a possibilidade de repetir a tarefa parcialmente modificada de maneira significativa. Tendo isso em vista, são apresentadas três tarefas com repetição imediata que focam a habilidade oral com vistas a desenvolver tanto fluência quanto a acurácia. Essas tarefas são, por natureza, adequadas à sala de aula de língua adicional e podem ser facilmente adaptadas para atender contextos específicos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino baseado em tarefas; repetição de tarefa; tarefa oral; interação entre aprendizes; inglês como língua adicional.

Corresponding Author:

RAFAEL ZACCARON

<rafaelzaccaron@gmail.com>



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1. INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. Indeed, to master a skill, one typically needs to practice it time and again so that conscious processes, which are monitored and can result in cognitive overload, become automated in the long run (Duffy and Roehler, 1989). The action of repeating, therefore, helps the learning process. In my teaching practice, I have been keen on creating opportunities that allow learners, especially the less confident ones, to build up their confidence prior to and during task performance so that they are able to perform. One of the most effective tools I have encountered is the use of immediate repetition tasks.

According to Bygate and Samuda (2005), repetition in L2¹ learning is perceived as a negative resource by some teachers. Undeniably, the idea of learners repeating a task might not seem attractive at first. However, research focused on task repetition has validated this tool for its positive impact on different aspects of learners' performance (Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011; Bygate, 2001; Côelho, 2017; Lynch and Maclean, 2000, 2001; Bei, 2013; Zaccaron, 2018). These studies have shown that offering learners the opportunity to repeat a task may trigger self-correction, which is in line with the idea of a student-centred approach. Students, in general, show better oral performance during a repeated task, especially the less confident ones, as repetition tends to reduce anxiety (Côelho, 2017).

Another positive aspect of task repetition on performance is its positive effect on fluency (Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011). According to Koponen and Riggenbach (2000), fluency is the “flow, continuity, automaticity, or smoothness of speech” (Koponen and Riggenbach, 2000, 6). Fluency is a consistent predictor of additional language proficiency. As such, possessing a fluent speech is a goal most additional language learners have. Research on task repetition has consistently found a positive effect on fluency (Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011; Bygate, 2001; Lynch and Maclean, 2000).

But what exactly is task repetition? Different from repetition per se, used in the audiolingual method for instance, when a learner would repeat the same activity or sentence in form of drills, task repetition is the “repetition of the same or slightly altered tasks – whether whole tasks, or parts of a task” (Bygate and Samuda, 2005, 43). The notion of working with slightly modified tasks for repetition is appealing, since it motivates students to work with what is not normally perceived by them as repetition. Furthermore, in repeating a task, learners can adapt their language to a new situation they are presented with (Larsen-Freeman, 2012), having the benefit of the knowledge from the previous task that has just been performed (Lynch and Maclean, 2000). In summary, in slightly changing the immediate repeated task, the repetition becomes meaningful for the learner.

Since the notion of repeating a task is no longer perceived by researchers and practitioners as opposed to communicative classes, more studies and teachers' ideas on how to implement meaningful tasks have appeared in the last two decades. An aspect raised by research is that offering meaningful opportunities for repetition is important (Zaccaron, 2018) as tasks require the use of meaning-focused additional language by learners - similar to the language they would use in their L1 (Ellis, 2005; Long, 1996) to perform equivalent tasks – as well as the need of attention to language form. As a result of this juxtaposition, additional language tasks may pose a cognitive overload to learners (Oxford, 2006) that can be lessened by immediate repetition task.

¹ In this paper I adopt the term additional language for (a) language(s) learnt other than the mother tongue in opposition to the terms foreign and second language. According to Saraceni (2009) “English should no longer be presented and taught as a foreign language, and hence as somebody else's language, but as an additional language to be added to one's linguistic repertoire, with the advantage of international currency” (p. 184). The term second language is only used on instances when quoted as such by the cited author.

2. IMMEDIATE REPETITION TASKS

The focus of repeated tasks research, initially, was on delayed repetition (Bygate, 2001), which could involve weeks or months. On the other hand, the underlying reason for immediate repetition tasks is that they are performed in immediate successive cycles. They generally have the following characteristics: there is an interlocutor change and/or a task alteration.

The often-cited study on immediate repetition tasks is Lynch and Maclean (2000). They developed the carousel task (see my adaptation below) for an English For Specific Purposes course. First, students in pairs had to prepare a poster over the course for a presentation. Then, the posters were lined up in a circle for the task and students swapped the roles of visitors and presenters; thus, each student would visit all posters posing questions about it. The presenters were instructed not to offer the same rehearsed presentation but interact with and answer questions posed by each visitor. The results indicated that immediate repetition offered benefits in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar for most participants.

Another positive outcome of immediate repetition tasks is what Lynch and Maclean (2000) termed recycled language. In repeating a task, the next cycle does not represent the same situation as before. A new interlocutor requires adaptation from students. This is the moment when language from the previous cycle(s) will be recycled and might be changed. There is a link with the concept of attention.

According to Schmidt (2001), attention is a limited resource. Therefore, one of the most appealing aspects repetition offers to additional language teaching is that, once students have focused on the message they wanted to convey in the first cycle, the repetition of the task allows for their attention to shift to linguistic aspects of the message (Bygate and Samuda, 2005) over the cycles. I have noticed that my students were able to correct their own speech during repetition.

Considering that attention is mainly focused on meaning during task performance, the post-task phase – when the teacher may direct the focus to form, posing awareness questions indirectly or explicitly dealing with language forms learners struggled with during performance – is of paramount importance as it can serve as an assessment tool and should, therefore, be an inherent part of a task. Sometimes learners do not notice their improved performance over the cycles (Zaccaron, 2018). This is why I find it essential to bring examples of improved performance during the post-task phase. I write down these positive examples, too, while observing students performing the task and work with them on the board so learners can direct their attention to form as well.

2.1 WHAT KIND OF IMMEDIATE REPETITION TASKS CAN BE DEVELOPED?

The rather straightforwardness of the technique makes the number of tasks that can be adapted to offer immediate repetition cycles countless. The first important aspect, however, is that they fulfil the requirements of a task, in opposition to an activity.

According to Ellis (2003), a task has four features: (1) a task involves a primary focus on meaning; (2) there is some sort of information gap, so participants need to exchange information; (3) learners choose the linguistics resources needed to complete the task; and, finally, (4) a task has a clearly defined non-linguistic goal. Moreover, Skehan's framework (Skehan, 2003) for task investigation and implementation has pedagogical implications. According to this framework, tasks involve a (a) pre-task phase that aims at lessening the cognitive burden they might pose to learners; the (b) task moment, when teachers should refrain from interfering in task performance and a (c) post-task phase, when the teacher can and should bring awareness to specific language points observed during task performance.

Next, I present three immediate repetition tasks I have used with my students, ranging from beginners to upper-intermediate, having an age gap varying from 12 to 55 years old. I have adapted speaking tasks suggested by textbooks or found on the internet to become immediate repetition tasks. Normally, the immediate repetition task is performed in the last half an hour of the class allowing for at least three cycles of repetition.

3. IMMEDIATE REPETITION TASKS: 3 IDEAS

3.1. TASK 1 – THE TRAVEL FAIR CAROUSEL TASK

This task was adapted from Lynch and Maclean's (2001) study. The main non-linguistic goal behind this task is that students work on a presentation, ideally in pairs, but for bigger groups I had students working in trios or maximum four. I have used this task with all proficiency levels; however, I find it particularly interesting for beginners and intermediate level students. Presentation time may vary, but I would say 60 minutes are needed in class plus prior preparation. The next steps detail the travel fair carousel task. Ideally, this task should be used when students are learning vocabulary linked to traveling.

1. Either split learners in pairs or ask them to pair up. Explain that they need to work as a pair for this task, which might involve out-of-class work. The main goal is to present to their colleagues a chosen destination (I let students decide on the destination, but make sure there is variety) trying to persuade them to visit this place. Therefore, they will be working as travel consultants during the presentation.
2. It is important that you model the presentation in class first. If you have access to a projector, you can have a slide on PowerPoint or create a more appealing infographic (on <https://venngage.com/>, for example). However, this is not really needed as students will have to bring their own material on presentation day. Bring plenty of leaflets and visuals of a destination you have chosen for modelling the task. It is easy to get those in a travel agency. Make it clear to students this will not be an in-front-of-the-class presentation.
3. Encourage students to use their creativity and bring appealing visuals which could be leaflets, images on a board, photos, etc. for the presentation day. They need to work on the presentation together but be able to present the whole work individually.
4. Preparation for the presentation: prior to learners' arrival, have the students' desks set as a circle in the classroom, in a carousel format. When they arrive, ask each pair to set their station with their own material.
5. Now, give the instruction that one student from each pair will stand next to the desk and be the presenter, while the other student will be a visitor. Emphasize the role of the visitor as an active participant who should ask meaningful questions. You might have some question samples on the board to scaffold students, should you feel it is necessary. The presenter needs to "sell" the destination, while answering the individual questions posed by each visitor.
6. Depending on the time allowed for this task and the number of students, you might let students move freely or set 4 to 5 minutes for each interaction. Explain they must visit all stations in the established order, around-the-clock, for instance. For a group of 12 students there will be 6 cycles of immediate repetition.
7. Once students have visited all stations, it is time to swap roles. So, the student that was presenting first is now the visitor and the other way around, then procedure 6 is repeated.

✓ **POST-TASK / ASSESSMENT:** An interesting post-task is to ask students to vote on their favorite travel consultant. With the result, elicit from learners the reason for that choice. Emphasize the use of linguistic resources such as appropriate vocabulary, intonation, answering questions promptly, etc. This is a key moment that can be used for highlighting specific language aspects the teacher has dealt with recently or the main difficulties faced by students as well as for assessing learners' performance and task success.

• **POSSIBLE OUTCOME:** Language related to advice (e.g., “you shouldn't miss...”), persuasive language (e.g., “a great reason for visiting...”) and questions using ‘Is there/ Are there’.

➤ **TIP:** Once you have a group of students who have done the task, ask their permission for using their visuals as an example for future groups. Highlight that this is learning material they have created. Student-designed materials foster peer-teaching and learning (Moiseenko, 2015). They usually feel flattered and are willing to help.

❖ **ADAPTATION:** I have also successfully adapted this task. In a different classroom, students were estate agents selling a property. The focus was on the use of comparative structures. Besides adapting it to different themes, a possible change to make it feel more like a travel fair would be inviting students from a different group to be visitors too. If that is the case, be sure to check with your students first that they feel comfortable with visitors.

3.2. TASK 2 – THE DECISION-MAKING TASK

I have adapted this task from a textbook. In previous classes, students were learning vocabulary related to food and grammar aspects on how to make suggestions. The last task suggested in the textbook was a decision-making task, when learners had to choose a restaurant based on menus printed in the book, that I turned into an immediate repetition task. The next steps offer some guideline but could be easily adapted to fit different topics.

PREPARATION

Prior to this class, look for menus in English of different restaurants online and, if possible, print them so students work with realia. This makes the task more appealing (Pegrum, 2000).

1. Pair up students first then give the following instruction: you will be presented with three options of different restaurants. You both are going to have dinner together and must choose one restaurant only. Compare the menus, special offers and prices and choose your favorite one; then, try and make suggestions to convince your friend.
2. First, model the task. Show three different menus to the class and present your arguments trying to convince them to join you for dinner in the restaurant you have chosen.
3. Provide three different menus for each pair. Then, ask learners to perform the task. You might find it useful to set a time limit. Encourage students to justify and support their choices with arguments, instead of just saying “Okay.”
4. Once each pair has chosen the restaurant, ask them to give you back the menu of the chosen restaurant; it is time to have the second cycle of repetition. Ask two pairs to join in, so that you have four students together. Explain they have just met other friends on the way; now, they must all choose together one restaurant only for dinner. Here, you should give the menu each pair has chosen and a third one that was rejected.

5. Once the second cycle has been completed, ask two groups of four students to get together. Repeat procedure number 4. If you feel it necessary, use 2 extra menus so all students participate in the discussion.
 - ✓ **POST-TASK / ASSESSMENT:** The post-task should focus on the reasons that motivated the group to choose the restaurant. Elicit from students the different aspects from the menu, linguistic and non-linguistic ones, the different prices with a focus on the currency, and personal tastes. You can quickly conduct a poll on the most influential speaker of the group eliciting the strategies used for convincing their classmates.
 - **POSSIBLE OUTCOME:** The use of language for making suggestion (e.g., “How about/Why don’t we...”), responding to suggestions (e.g., “I’d prefer to...”), and agreeing and disagreeing (e.g., “I’m afraid I disagree”).
 - **TIP:** The more students you get together, the funnier the conversation gets, in my own experience. However, some quiet learners tend not to participate in bigger groups sometimes. Make sure you go around the class during practice and ask the quiet students for their opinion and whether they agree with what has been discussed.
 - ❖ **ADAPTATION:** This task works well for a group of 16 students or more. In case you have fewer students in the classroom, an option to use this task is that after the first cycle you ask students to change pairs. The second cycle will be done in pairs again and for the final (third) cycle you can merge two pairs, having four learners. For stronger groups, you might add a third menu that was not previously used in a cycle. Adding a surprise element (new menu) to the discussion can, on the one hand, increase the cognitive load and require some time for students to adjust to a new scenario; on the other hand, it might keep the conversation going, making the repetition meaningful.

3.3. TASK 3 – THE ANECDOTE TASK – MY TREASURED POSSESSION

This is a simple task that does not require a lot of preparation. In fact, it is a speaking task that students would do at the end of the class adapted to offer a set of repeat cycles.

In previous classes, students were talking about past experiences using different past forms and vocabulary linked to personal belongings and emotions. Therefore, I named the task ‘my treasured possession’. This task is, usually, very engaging as students like to talk about their favourite possession that could be a book, a mobile phone, a photograph, etc.

PREPARATION:

It is wise to prepare guiding questions to scaffold students that have more difficulties in speaking tasks to help them prepare their anecdote. These might include but should not be limited to:

- What is it made of?
 - What colour is it?
 - When did you get/buy it?
 - Does it remind you of someone or a situation? Which one?
 - Why is it so special to you?
1. First, model the task. Talk about your most treasured possession to the whole group. Make sure you give as many details as possible and ask learners to pose questions to you.

2. Pre-task: give students 1 minute of planning time for them to prepare to talk. Planning time is necessary, as this is a demanding oral task. According to Ellis (2005), planning for challenging tasks is an important step that improves students' performance. Students can take notes during planning but explain these notes cannot be used during the speaking task. Otherwise, this might turn into a reading activity.
3. When planning time is up, ask students to stand up and all come to the front of the class and mingle.
4. Explain that they should talk to a person they normally do not work with and they will tell each other, one after the other, about their treasured possession. Each student will have 2 minutes and they will all do the task at the same time.
5. Go around the class monitoring the task and help only if necessary.
6. Once time is up, ask students to change pairs and retell the story about the possession.
7. Repeat procedures 4, 5 and 6 as many times as you feel the class is benefitting from it so it does not become automated and too repetitive.
 - ✓ **POST-TASK / ASSESSMENT:** Once all students have returned to their chairs, I like to ask them, the whole group, how the experience of repeating the story was and which cycle/repetition was their best. Elicit possible reasons for it and highlight the benefits of repetition for additional language learning.
 - **POSSIBLE OUTCOME:** The use of adjective and past forms ("I bought/I used to play with...").
 - **TIP:** You might find it useful to have quiet music in the background, so they feel less intimidated by the task.
 - ❖ **ADAPTATION:** This task can be easily adapted to fit different topics as long as students are offered plenty of practice with the necessary vocabulary and structures for the speaking task beforehand. Choose a topic that students can engage with. I have used topics such as: holidays that went wrong, my favorite book, etc.

4. CONCLUSION

As English teachers, we should strive to find extra opportunities for learners who have difficulties in developing all four skills and this includes the speaking one. Immediate repetition tasks seem to bridge the gap often found between additional language research and additional language teaching. Not only have I read research that tasks immediately repeated by learners help in reducing anxiety, language "recycling", shifting attention from meaning to form, and improving fluency but, also, I have seen such benefits with several groups of learners.

In Zaccaron (2018), students reported that they did not feel they were repeating the task over the cycles. That is because each cycle offered the right balance of novelty combined with repetition. In my experience, the adaptability immediate repetition tasks offer seem to be a good opportunity for teachers to use them in different classroom settings and levels. These communicative tasks cater for both focuses needed for additional language learning: a primary focus on meaning but also a focus on form.

In this paper, I have presented three immediate repetition tasks that focused on the speaking skill in a meaningful way. It is important to highlight that the overt objective of this paper is not to prescribe a set of tasks that are disconnected from the rest of the

additional language lessons, but to share ideas successfully implemented that were part of a task-based approach to language teaching. Finally, opportunities for designing and employing immediate repetition tasks are limitless, I invite you to adapt and use the ones described in this paper with your students and also create your own.

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Corresponding Author:

Rafael Zaccaron

Mestre em inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC).

E-mail: rafaelzaccaron@gmail.com

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7796-501X>

Endereço: Centro de Comunicação e Expressão, CCE “B”, Sala 313, Campus Universitário – Trindade, 88.040-900, Florianópolis, SC, Brasil.