

A Study of Applying Memorization Method to Enhance Primary School Students' English Oral Ability

Wen-Chin Chen, Min-Chuan Yang, and Kuan-Ming Lin

Abstract—This study aims to investigate the effects of applying memorization to language teaching on the sixth graders' speaking ability, in addition to their attitudes toward memorization. Two homogenous classes from an elementary school in New Taipei City, named as Experimental Group and Control Group, containing 45 sixth graders, participated in this ten-week program. Experimental Group received the experimental instructions, whereas Control Group was given the traditional instructions without any memorization activities. Both took a pretest and a posttest before/after the program and were asked to complete an attitude questionnaire. Finally, I collected and analyzed the data by ANCOVA. The major findings of this study are presented as follows:

- 1) The memorization method had better effects on students' oral ability than traditional approach.
- 2) There was a significant difference in the subjects' oral accuracy and fluency between the two groups, and Experimental Group performed better than Control Group.
- 3) The memorization method enabled the students to deal with questions related to their personal lives.
- 4) Teaching through memorization improved the students' abilities of speaking, listening and reading.
- 5) Students held positive attitudes toward learning English through memorization and the speaking activities adopted.

Index Terms—Memorization method, oral proficiency, speaking activities, the audio-lingual method.

I. INTRODUCTION

Technology nowadays has shortened the distance among people and made the world we are living in a "global village." As a result, people of different nationalities are often in a situation that requires them to communicate in a lingua franca. Undoubtedly, English has been shown to be the major world language. It is not only the language of all business and knowledge fields but the most commonly used one. However, being an English teacher for nearly fifteen years since our primary English education was first officially launched in 2001, the researcher still finds a large number of students reluctant, afraid or even anxious to speak this target language inside or outside the classroom. This phenomenon is especially true to those non-native speakers in an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situation and clearly points out the major factor that

hinders learners from acquiring language proficiency - anxiety. Therefore, to help students reduce this "mental block," it is inevitable and imperative for ESL/EFL teachers to adopt different strategies and activities.

Among all language learning strategies, memorization, the extreme example of habit formation, is the representative technique of audio-lingual method and has already had a long history in Chinese education. However, Since researches on the effectiveness of applying memorization method to language teaching are mostly conducted in high schools or colleges, and still many researchers debated on the use of memorization in language teaching, I attempt to clarify its effects on young EFL learners' oral performance by asking students to memorize textbook contents and dialogues, and at the same time to understand whether this strategy will improve their attitude toward English speaking.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Rote Learning Versus Meaningful Learning

Brown [1] stated that meaningful learning refers to "a process of relating and anchoring new material to relevant existed entities in cognitive structure". In other words, learners have to associate and combine new knowledge with their prior knowledge consciously [2]. On the contrary, when a learner makes very little or even no effort to relate new information with what is already established, then rote learning comes about.

Table I below clearly points out the characteristics of meaningful learning and rote learning.

TABLE I: CHARACTERISTICS OF MEANINGFUL LEARNING AND ROTE LEARNING

Learning Type	Characteristics
Meaningful Learning	Non-arbitrary, non-verbatim, substantive assimilation of new knowledge into cognitive structure Deliberate effort to combine new knowledge with higher order concepts in cognitive structure
Rote Learning	Arbitrary, verbatim, non-substantive incorporation of new knowledge into cognitive structure No effort to integrate new knowledge with existing concepts in cognitive structure

Up to date, there have been controversies over meaningful learning and rote learning. Some educators suggest that learners adopt meaningful learning since learning involves both knowledge acquisition and knowledge application. Brown [1] suggested that teachers relate new information or concept to students' old knowledge so as to create stronger

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retention. Besides, Lujan & DiCarlo [3] also commented learning does not mean to memorize lots of facts but to find, to evaluate, and to apply information with resources and that it is active processing of information that leads to learning.

However, some researchers believe rote learning is indeed an effective way of getting basic knowledge in the early stages of language learning and that basic learning skills can be developed through RL, which may be beneficial for the accuracy of knowledge. Gairns & Redman [4] commented on RL that in the early stages of language learning, students get the opportunity to manipulate the oral and written forms of language items through repetition, and many derive a strong sense of progress and achievement from it. Gordon [5] also believed there is no better way to develop basic skills except through RL-- regular correct practice for a period of time. The more often students repeat an activity, the better they become at it.

In conclusion, educators should have a thorough understanding of rote learning and meaningful learning, and make good use of the strategies involved as well so that learners may equip themselves with firm knowledge, skills and technique and also be motivated to be creative and hence more individual.

B. Memorization as a Language Learning Strategy

Oxford [6] indicated that second language proficiency is greatly related to language learning strategies which are actions taken by learners in the hope of making learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and even more effective. As one of the strategies often adopted by ESL/EFL learners, memorization strategy is always applied in the language classroom to build up students' vocabulary and help them remember pronunciation, lexis, usages, and so on. Table II shows some of the major positive findings about memorization.

TABLE II: FINDINGS OF RESEARCHERS ON THE USE OF MEMORIZATION

Name of researchers	Major Findings
Duong & Nguyen [7]	The effects of memorization not only on students' speaking and writing abilities but also their communication have been proved.
Ding [8]	The three interviewees who had won prizes in nationwide English speaking competitions and debate tournaments in China regarded text memorization and imitation as the most effective English learning method which enabled them to borrow these sequences for productive use, to improve pronunciation, and to develop the habit of attending to details of language in the context of language input.
Ikuo [9]	By memorizing short sentences, the improvement in learners' speaking skill was observed in nearly 75 percent of the subjects.

However, some researchers still disapprove its usefulness. Table III lists out their beliefs towards memorization as well.

TABLE III: NEGATIVE BELIEFS OF RESEARCHERS TOWARDS THE USE OF MEMORIZATION

Name of Researchers	Major Findings
Huang [10]	Memorization strategy is less effective than translation strategy. Besides, the subjects were less motivated and showed negative responses to memorization strategy.
Orlin [11]	Memorization only runs parallel to the best

parts of learning, never intersecting. It's a detour around all the action, a way of answering without understanding, of knowing without learning.

Therefore, it is clear that whether memorization is effective still leaves room to discuss.

C. The Audio-Lingual Method

As one of the most influential methods in the history of foreign language teaching, the audio-lingual method focuses mainly on hearing and speaking abilities in language learning. Based on behaviorism, which interprets language learning in terms of stimulus and response, operant conditioning, and reinforcement with a stress on successful error-free learning, it assumes that language is learnt through imitation, repetition, and controlled practice. Moreover, it is believed that habitual learning involves both the imitation of the language patterns of native speakers and repetition of those patterns through a number of oral drills in order to make sure that students are equipped with native-like pronunciation and the automaticity of language production [12]. Therefore, in this research, the audio-lingual method is applied. Moreover, to make sure that the subjects are able to use the patterns learnt in different contexts, I move onto communicative practice so that the students can really communicate with accurate production.

D. English Speaking Activities

Fun and meaningful activities are beneficial for both teachers and students to activate language instruction and develop speaking abilities, for they create a much more friendly learning environment that helps reduce students' anxiety and motivates them to speak [13]. In general, for different levels of learners, there are three types of speaking activities with various focuses: structured, semi-structured, and communicative activities. Table IV below clearly points out their different focuses and activities that can be done.

TABLE IV: DIFFERENT FOCUSES OF THREE SPEAKING ACTIVITIES AND RELATED ACTIVITIES

Type of Activities	Focuses	Related Activities
Structured	Grammatical rules, structures and drills	Repetition practice & drills, pictures & flash cards, dialogues, information gap
Semi-structured	Oral accuracy with some practice on oral fluency	Meaningful drills, roll-plays, model dialogues
Communicative	Communication itself, free oral speaking	Discussions, role-play & dialogues, simulation, pictures & stories, brainstorming, interviews, puzzles & problems

(Adapted from Ho [14])

As shown in Table V, in order to equip students with the basic knowledge of English, activities such as pictures, dialogues, repetition practice and drills are adopted in structured speaking activities. According to Castillo [15], repetition practice of words or sentences helps learners use words correctly and pronounce better. Kartikasari et al. [16] further proved in their research that students speaking ability can be improved through repetition drill technique. As for

dialogues and drills, they are techniques found useful when teaching phonological, lexical or grammatical items. Learners can practice dialogues in pairs as long as they get familiar with the new sounds.

In semi-structured speaking activities, students develop their speaking skills by doing meaningful drills, role-plays or model dialogues. Khaki [17] claimed that in meaningful drills, learners can practice oral repetition with more stress on meaning than forms, which means that learners must understand the meaning of the drill so as to respond to it. He further proved in his research that learners receiving meaningful drills performed better than those who received mechanical drills, for meaningful drills better prepared learners for communication in real situations. Milchatun et al. [18] also proved that role-plays encouraged learners to express their ideas freely and that the students felt confident with their ability in solving problem, and more creative.

In summary, speaking activities help to inspire and build confidence in learners as they offer a great variety of techniques and contexts to practice oral skills. Different speaking activities play their unique roles in speaking development; therefore, they should be well-planned beforehand to meet the learners' needs. In this study, since the subjects are the sixth graders in the elementary school, based on memorization method, dialogues (structured activities), meaningful drills, role plays and Reader's Theater (semi-structured activities) are all implemented with a view to developing the learners' oral fluency and preparing them to talk in real-life situations.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 45 sixth graders from two classes in Tu-Chen Elementary school. Class A, known as the experimental group in this study, contained 22 students and was given the experimental instructions, while Class B, the control group, involved 23 students and was given traditional instructions. Both taught by the researcher, they had three English classes per week and each class lasted for 40 minutes. Since they were all native Chinese speakers and shared similar social and educational background, a great number of them, like most Asian learners, did better on reading and writing than listening and speaking. Some of them even felt anxious when asked to talk in class. None of them ever participated in any textbook memorization activities.

B. Teaching Materials

The textbook used is *Story.com! - Book 7*, published by Hess International Educational Group. Both Experimental Group and Control Group were learning English from this textbook. The only difference was that the experimental group was asked to memorize the whole contents of Units 1&2 while the control group was not. Besides, each class period is forty minutes. The researcher would spend ten minutes leading Experimental Group to recite the whole contents of the units, and then move on to the next step – speaking activities, followed by Q&A to wrap up the class.

C. Instruments

Instruments of the study consisted of (a) the pre-test, (b) the post-test, and (c) a student attitude questionnaire. Firstly, The Basic English Ability Assessment designed for elementary school students in New Taipei City was used as a pre-test to group the subjects. Specially designed for all the schools in New Taipei City, it was considered reliable and equivalent to an elementary school student's English level.

Secondly, the first section of the posttest consisted of 10 questions, all of which related to the contents of the two units taught. The subjects were asked to answer the questions in complete sentences. As for the second section, it contained 10 questions as well; however, these questions were related to the subjects' daily lives. The subjects had to apply all the knowledge learned to answering these oral questions. As for the scoring system, since this research was to test the subjects' oral ability, the subjects were evaluated based on their accuracy and fluency. Accuracy includes their correct usage of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures, while fluency involves pronunciation and intonation. The percentage of scoring is shown as follows.

TABLE V: THE SCORING SYSTEM OF THE POSTTEST

	Accuracy (50%)	Fluency (50%)	Total Scores
Part 1	5 points/1 question	5 points/1 question	100 points
Part 2	5 points/1 question	5 points/1 question	100 points

Procedure of the Study

Fig. 1 below shows the overall procedure of this study

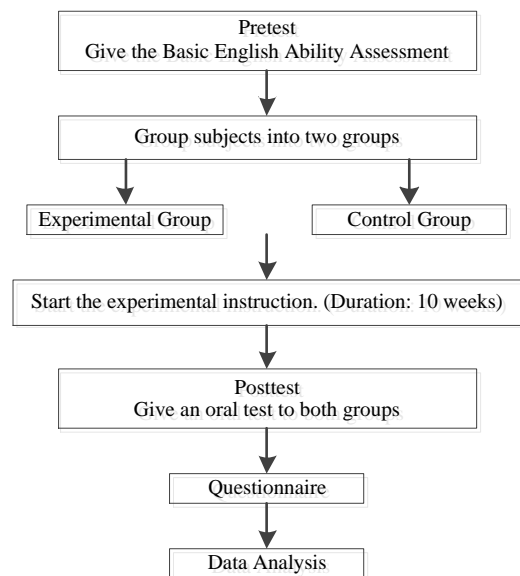


Fig. 1. Study procedure.

D. Data Analysis

I quantitatively collected the data from the two instruments – the post-test and the questionnaire, and then analyzed them mainly using the SPSS for Windows software. Finally, one-way ANCOVA was employed to test the result.

Results and Discussion

E. Results

- 1) The memorization method had better effects on students' oral ability than traditional approach: According to the results of the oral performance, there

was a significant difference between Experimental Group and Control Group ($F = 13.113$, $p = 0.001 < .01$). And Experimental Group ($Ma = 86.506$) apparently had a better learning effect than Control Group ($Ma = 70.125$).

- 2) There was a significant difference in the subjects' oral accuracy and fluency between the two groups: After receiving the instruction, Experimental group scored higher than Control Group on both accuracy and fluency, which echoed the three interviewees in Ding's [8] research, who considered text memorization and imitation the most effective learning method to learn collocations and sequences, to improve pronunciation, and to develop the habit of attending to details of language in the context of language input.
- 3) The memorization method enabled the students to deal with questions related to their personal lives:
- 4) To prove whether text memorization equips young learners with the abilities and skills to express their own ideas in English, the oral questions were divided into two parts by design to see whether those who did well on text-related questions could perform well when asked questions about themselves. The outcome shown finally confirmed it, which also supported Khaki's [17] statement that meaningful drills and memorization better prepared learners for communication in real situations.
- 5) Teaching through memorization improved the students' abilities of speaking, listening and reading: According to the results of the questionnaire, more than 85% of the subjects agreed that, after the speaking activities, they pronounced and listened better, read faster, and most importantly, they could finally answer questions with complete, correct sentences. This finding was in accordance with Oradee's [19] as well.
- 6) Students held positive attitudes toward learning English through memorization and the speaking activities adopted: Most of the students agreed that the speaking activities (Dialogue memorization, Repetition and Drills, Roll-play & Reader's Theater) adopted in the instruction were easy and fun. Furthermore, in addition to the phonological, lexical and grammatical knowledge, they claimed to have gained a sense of achievement through memorization and started to find this language interesting. Most important of all, nearly all of the subjects agreed that they were no longer afraid of speaking English. All in all, to most of them, memorization is a good way to learn English and they will continue to use memorization as one of their learning strategies in the future.

F. Discussion

The statistical results of the first research question indicate that, after the experimental instruction, there was a significant difference in the students' oral ability between Control Group and Experimental Group. They also reveal a fact that the learning effect of Experimental Group after the

ten-week memorization activities was much better than that of Control Group. In addition, these memorization activities enhanced not just the oral accuracy but fluency of the subjects. Experimental Group performed significantly better than Control Group.

Furthermore, the statistical results of the second question show that Experimental Group did have a better performance in real-life questions than Control Group after the instruction. The adjusted mean score (43.304) of Experimental Group was higher than that (36.361) of Control Group, and a significant difference was found as well (The F -value was 10.192, and the p -value was $.003 < .01$). Experimental Group did not just do better on Part 2, which contained questions related to their real-life; in fact, the subjects in Experimental Group also scored higher than those in Control Group when answering those questions from the two given units in the textbook. Therefore, in order to see whether there was a significant correlation between these two components in the posttest, the researcher applied Pearson Correlation Analysis, and the result proved that the subjects' performances in these two parts are significantly highly correlated. The better the subjects performed in Part 1, the higher scores they got in Part 2. In other words, memorization activities indeed improved the students' oral ability.

As for the subjects' attitudes toward English speaking after receiving memorization instruction and their comments toward learning English through memorization, the survey results show that most of the subjects held a more positive attitude toward their English speaking after the instruction as well as the memorization activities during the instruction. In the first part of the questionnaire, 100% of the subjects in Experimental Group agreed that, through memorization, they learned more words and sentences and got more familiar with sentence patterns. More than 85% of the subjects agreed their pronunciation was better, their speaking, listening and reading abilities improved and that they could finally respond to the teacher's questions with complete sentences. Most importantly, more than 75% of them claimed that they found themselves more interested in English learning after the instruction, and about 95% of the subjects said that they gained a sense of achievement through memorization method, and that they had no fear for speaking English anymore.

In the second part, instead of getting bored in class, 95.4% of the students found it quite easy to memorize English dialogues, and 81.8% of them even considered it an interesting and challenging thing to do. As to the other speaking activities inclusive of repetition and drills, role-play and Reader's Theater, 9.1% of the students didn't see repetition and drills as interesting ways to learn English, but there were still 90.9% of them who found them quite fun. In addition, more than 85% of the subjects claimed that, after the instruction, they will understand dialogues before they memorize them and 77.3% of them will review the dialogues after memorizing them. Most important of all, 95.5% of the subjects agreed that memorization is a good method to learn English, and that they will continue to use it as one of their learning strategies in the future.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research were in accordance with some of the researchers' findings. For instance, Li [20] and Ikuo [9]

supported the idea that, by means of memorization method, the students not only improved their abilities of listening, speaking and reading, but increased their knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structures.

Based on the findings of this study, I made some pedagogical implications for English instruction. First of all, it is crucial that language instructors help students build a correct and positive attitude toward memorization, guide them to memorize any given materials with full understanding, and make the whole process more interesting and inspiring.

Second, text memorization is not just about memorizing the materials given to learners. It is of great importance that learners need to fully understand the content first and then output the sentences learned in the content naturally after memorizing them. To achieve that goal, asking English questions in a content-based order is essential. It not only helps learners get familiar with the content and quickly memorize it but also equips them with the ability to find the correct answers to the questions and orally output them. After many times of practicing the same questions in the same order, the instructor may try giving those text-based questions randomly or shift to their life-related questions to confirm students know when and how to apply those sentences learned. Most importantly, it will surely build up learners' confidence in speaking the target language as well.

Third, to prevent students from getting bored with those repetition drills and to help them internalize and preserve the information permanently, more follow-up speaking activities like role-plays, Reader's Theater or Q&A can be carried out.

Last but not least, positive feedback is a must. For most EFL learners whose intrinsic motivation is low or even those who hold negative attitudes toward English learning, constant and sincere positive feedback definitely gives them much confidence and a sense of success in the process of language learning. Once encouraged, they will be more willing to take more challenges. And even if they fail, they will be more eager to try again.

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