

SAY IT AGAIN!

Repetition is a powerful explanation strategy that doesn't need to be boring, says **Colin Foster**...

Everyone knows that repetition is important for learning. Retrieval practice seems to be everywhere in schools at the moment, whether in the 'Do Nows' at the start of lessons, via regular formative assessments or built into homework activities.

Yet I rarely see repetition treated with the importance it deserves when it comes to teacher explanations. Often, it seems to be assumed that saying something once should be enough – but is it?

Speaking, not heard

Every teacher knows that they may need to repeat themselves on occasion, especially when students are distracted and not listening. This is a frustrating, but familiar reality of classroom teaching. But what about those times when the students *are* listening?

It might seem pointless to repeat yourself when the students were giving you their full attention first time round. They aren't having any difficulties hearing you, so why say the same thing to them again? Won't that just lead to boredom and cause students to switch off?

New teachers are often surprised to find that students seem not to know *the very thing that they have just been told*. What these new teachers are discovering is how they can have been *speaking* to their students, yet not have been *heard*.

We can relate this to instructions about what to do next, or to content that the teacher is presenting. The teacher does their explanation – which seems to

have gone down perfectly well – and then circulates around the room. Then they suddenly discover that the students don't seem to know the information they've been discussing immediately before. "*But...I just told you that!*" the teacher will say, in disbelief.

This kind of scenario won't be unfamiliar to the more

really take in what we're saying and properly absorb it. If an explanation is important, then once is rarely enough. I've often been surprised at how a student who seems completely confused can appear to instantly sort themselves out after having just one more chance at hearing an explanation.

“The experienced teacher knows that smiling, nodding students aren't necessarily actively listening to what they're saying”

experienced teachers among you. We'll often put it down to a lack of effort or attention on the part of our students – but I don't believe this is necessarily the case.

Once is rarely enough

The curse of knowledge means that teachers are always at risk of thinking what they're teaching is simpler than it actually is. We've explained something a hundred times, thus ensuring that it's very familiar and clear to *us*. We might even be rather pleased with our explanation, which we've carefully honed over the years, to the point where it becomes hard to see how any student could fail to grasp it.

And indeed, it may be that there's nothing wrong with our explanation at all. The issue is rather that our students may need more than one bite at the apple to

Relative importance

I've noticed how both less experienced and veteran teachers alike will often give what appear to me to be very good explanations – but that experienced teachers' explanations will include quite a bit more repetition.

One reason for this is that the experienced teacher will be more capable of distinguishing between the most important and least important parts of their explanation. A less experienced teacher will more frequently have a 'flat profile' in terms of how they signal importance. They'll

say a whole lot of things, but to the non-expert, it's perhaps somewhat unclear which they see as being most central to grasping the point. The most important ideas will be effectively buried amid the details.

The experienced teacher is more likely to say something like, *'The thing you really have to remember here is...'* or *'Listen carefully to this next bit – this is the big idea,'* or *'There's really just one main thing you have to understand about this'*. This isn't just a strategy for combating inattention – they'll still say this kind of thing even if the class are sat in silence looking directly at them and nodding.

The experienced teacher knows that smiling, nodding students aren't necessarily actively listening to what they're saying. Capable teachers will, of course, be careful not to overuse these strategies, lest they

become ineffective. But I do hear that kind of repetition a fair bit when watching experienced teachers at work.

Highlighting

In written text, we can identify important elements by using bold subheadings – like the one just above these lines – to 'highlight' the main ideas I'm talking about. But how do you do this in speech? Surely not by just speaking more loudly...?

The main equivalent of the highlighting pen when speaking aloud is, simply, *use of repetition*.

Experienced teachers can often be quite explicit about this – *"What I've just said there is really important. I'm going to say it again."*

We need to help students see the wood for the trees. If we simply say *'Everything is*

important', that's analogous to the student who indiscriminately runs their highlighter pen over every line of their revision guide. It may look pretty, but if everything stands out then nothing stands out.

Similarly, we have to be selective with what to highlight by repetition, so that we can draw students' attention to those key ideas. This requires thinking deeply about the curriculum and the content, so that we can better discern what those key ideas actually are.

Avoiding tedium

But how do we prevent our delivery from becoming merely boring, and prompting students to tune out? If they know that we're going to be saying everything twice, will they only bother listening for half the time?

I think there has to be a natural degree of unpredictability to our delivery, so that students can't predict when and what will be repeated. This means they need to stay on their toes if they're going to follow – but I also think there are other things we can do to

avoid becoming tedious.

If something is worth saying once, it's often worth saying more than once. Repetition can be extremely valuable when focused on the most important points.

Do you see what I did there, in those two preceding sentences? The second one essentially repeats the same point made in the first, but not in exactly the same words. The meaning is similar, so I've succeeded in repeating my main point – but I haven't simply reproduced the sentence by copying and pasting it.

Experienced teachers will do this often. They're extremely good at saying the same thing in two, three or even four different ways. I would surmise that teachers typically perfect this skill by having to adapt their explanations to different student groups and classes.

They can always explain the same thing again in a slightly different way, for a student who didn't follow the first time, but I'll see this skill deployed most often in classrooms when the teacher is speaking to the whole class.

The teacher will emphasise their point repeatedly, but using slightly different language each time, thus avoiding monotony while still underlining the point they want to highlight.

Careful use of repetition like this can help students grasp things more efficiently, and ultimately feel more successful.



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