

*Repetitio Mater Memoriae: The Role of Frequent Assessment*  
in Increasing Vocabulary Retention

Instructors of Latin and Greek are confronted with the age-old problem of producing effective methods by which their students can more efficiently memorize and retain vocabulary words of the target language. Theoretical laboratory studies and limited practical research in the classroom have demonstrated the efficacy of the so-called “testing effect.” This term refers to a phenomenon in which frequent assessments on studied material promotes learning and retention of this material on final tests (McDaniel and Masson, 1985). This paper reports a limited investigation of the testing effect in a middle school Latin course. Specifically, it tests the testing effect to determine the extent to which this method may help to improve the students’ ability in translating phrases and sentences written in Latin through increased vocabulary retention. It was determined that quizzing, but not additional reviewing, improved student performance on the final test. Moreover, quizzes that demanded students to provide the full identification of target vocabulary words produced greater mnemonic benefits than those consisting of multiple choice questions. This conclusion aligns with laboratory results demonstrating that short answer or “recall” tests provide greater mnemonic benefits than multiple choice or “recognition” tests (Pashler et al., 2005; and Kang et al., 2007). Thus, frequent assessments can be a tool for not only evaluating student learning, but for promoting it as well.

The literature on the testing effect is considerable and illustrates how studied material inculcates learning and retention of the subject in question on a final assessment. Research has demonstrated the effects of this approach on a wide variety of subjects and forms of assessments (for review of bibliography, see McDaniel et al., 2007). Educational literature, however, appears to be unaware or uninterested in the benefits of the testing effect on student learning and

retention of studied material. Some of this may be due to the fact that educational theories have generally downplayed the importance of a well-cultivated memory in the intellectual training of children and young adults. Another reason may be the fact that the conclusions regarding the benefits of the testing effect appear in the literature of educational psychology, which has done little to provide studies based on experiences in classrooms. The lone exception to this is the recent research of McDaniel et al., which measured the testing effect on college students in an online “Brains and Behavior” semester course. No research has been carried out on pre-college students and no studies exist that measure the benefits of this strategy in the field of foreign languages. The situation is a catch 22 of sorts, for so long as current educational theory downplays the benefits of a well cultivated memory, educational practice will follow suite with the result that there will be few or no experiments on the role of the testing effect in the classroom. This paper seeks in part to redress this issue and reports the results of an experiment similar to that of McDaniel et al., but carried out on Latin students of middle school age.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the testing effect on middle school level foreign language learners during a portion of their seventh grade year. How does the testing effect appear in such a course? As with McDaniel et al., this research is carried out under very different circumstances than those of a carefully controlled laboratory. For instance, delays between assessments tend to be greater than those in a laboratory, which are often minutes or hours, not the days and weeks of a normal class schedule. Class composition was also taken into account, especially with regard to student abilities, learning styles and backgrounds. This paper takes these factors into account and attempts to control them.

The results of this experiment suggest that assessment as a means of learning and retention of studied information is an important educational practice and should be considered by

not only instructors of Latin, Greek and other foreign languages, but by educators of any course that requires the memorization of a large body of facts.

## References

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