International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)
Volume 2, Issue 10, October 2014, PP 50-57
ISSN 2347-3126 (Print) & ISSN 2347-3134 (Online)
www.arcjournals.org

Repetition and Learning by Heart in the Non-Confucian Heritage Culture: A Historical Review

Yu, Xia
Foreign Language School
Southwest University of Political Science and Law
Chongqing, P.R. China
Sheilayu327@hotmail.com

Abstract: *This paper reviews how repetition and learning by heart was practiced in the non-Confucian heritage culture from a historical perspective. It examines the textual memorisation in religious practice and education in medieval Europe and illustrates a few cases of positive voices on repetition and mimicry-memorisation in the modern West. This paper concludes that memorisation is by no means unique to Confucian heritage China and raise questions for future research.*

Keywords: *repetition, memorisation, non-Confucian heritage culture, review, history.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In foreign language education, repetition and learning by heart has long been imprinted with the mark of language learning with characteristics. It needs to be pointed out that the Confucian-heritage learners especially Chinese are not the only people in history who have heavily practised or attached importance to memorisation. This paper aims to demonstrate that memorisation had, in effect, been central in Anglophone western education up to the recent past; in addition, there was no dearth of positive voices for memorisation from western scholars although it has been attacked in mainstream education in the modern West.

2. MEMORISATION IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

According to Thompson (2009), '[U]ntil about 4000 b.c. all literature was oral', and all cultures in the world have in the past maintained oral traditions whose continued existence depended on memory, for, at that time, 'all of what is called literary expression was carried in the memory of the folk, and especially of gifted narrators'. Since the world learned to use writing, written languages in various cultures made it possible to standardize established texts. The practice of using writing was however, in the earliest stage of record-making, 'exceptionally for solemn religious or oral purposes' (Clanchy, 1993: 2).

As a special kind of oral tradition, religious ceremonies and healing rites often require their performers, i.e. priests and shamans, to reproduce ritualistic texts word for word, with complete faithfulness to what has been passed down to them (Thompson, 1997).

To illustrate how the accuracy of memory was emphasized in ritualistic routines in a medieval Christian monastery or church, Clanchy noted:

> By constant repetition the clergy learned the liturgy by heart. In monastic choirs the demon Tutivillus was believed to collect up sackfuls of dropped syllables from the Psalms to be

> weighed up at the Last Judgement against those who voiced the texts inaccurately[1]. Monks who failed to say their prayers correctly invalidated them and endangered not only their own souls but their patrons' as well. (Clanchy, 1993: 62)

Modern mnemonic techniques, according to Carruthers (1990), can be traced back to the inheritance of classical antiquity which the monks used to help them memorise the many works they had to read. As van Houts (1999: 7) put it:

> No monastery had enough books, Bibles, biblical commentaries or important classical texts for each monk to have his own bookshelf. Hence monks had to memorise a considerable amount of literature. To be able to understand and interpret the Bible, for example, one had to be sure that the text was firmly fixed in one's mind. All sorts of tricks were devised to make this job easier.

Hugh of St Victor, an influential teacher of biblical studies in the 12th century, devised several schemes to help his pupils memorise psalter and Biblical texts for precisely these reasons (cf. Carruthers, 1990: 261-266). It was recorded that, in writing a compilation of patristic texts on the Gospels, St. Thomas Aquinas, an Italian theologian in the 13th century, 'put the compilation together from texts that he had read and committed to memory from time to time while staying in various religious houses' (Gui cited in Carruthers, 1990: 3). It seemed that enhancing one's memory capacity became an essential part of monastic life. It was also recorded that in one monastery, each monk was given one book to study for a year (Clanchy, 1982). This was not very different from private school students in ancient China who spend years learning by heart only a few classics.

In ancient Hindu education, the Veda[2], the scripture of the Hindus, was also taught in a similar way to how the Confucian classics were learned in ancient China:

> The teacher would instruct the few students seated on the ground about him by rote, and for many hours daily they would repeat verse after verse, until one or more was mastered. Sometimes, to ensure correctness, the hymns were taught in more than one way, … or in even more complicated ways. (Basham, 1954: 163)

It is this remarkable system of mnemonic checks and the patience and brilliant memories of many generations of teachers and students which preserved the Vedas for posterity in much the same form as that in which they existed nearly a thousand years before Christ (ibid). Even today, parts of the Veda are still recited and memorised as a 'religious act of great merit' (van Buitenen, 1997: 529).

3. MEMORISATION IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Although text memorisation has generally been marginalised in contemporary Western education or even worse, treated as, in Cook's (1994: 133) words, 'an unforgivable sin' or 'as though there is no case to argue' against it, it is by no means absent in history. On the contrary, memory was the psychological faculty valued above all others in the period stretching from late antiquity through to the Renaissance (Carruthers, 1990).

---

[1] In one of his sermons Jacques de Vitry told the story of how a cleric in choir saw a devil weighed down with a sack. The devil explained that the sack was full of 'syllables and slurred utterances and verses of the psalms' which the clergy had stolen from God when enunciating their prayers incorrectly. (For more about the story, see Clanchy, 1993: 187)

[2] Veda literally means 'knowledge' and is regarded as the embodiment of eternal truth that was once revealed to gifted and inspired seers (*rishis*), who in turn transcribed it into Sanskrit (van Buitenen, 1997)

In her detailed analysis of uses of memory and the conceptions of memory in the Middle Ages, Carruthers (1990) showed how memory played a significant role in medieval people's intellectual and cultural lives. The great values they attached to memory can be sensed from Carruthers's depiction:

> Ancient and medieval people reserved their awe for memory. Their greatest geniuses they describe as people of superior memories, they boast unashamedly of their prowess in that faculty, and they regard it as a mark of superior moral character as well as intellect. (Carruthers, 1990: I; emphasis original)
>
> … …
>
> Memoria, …, was a part of litteratura: indeed it was what literature, in a fundamental sense, was for. Memory is one of the five divisions of ancient and medieval rhetoric; it was regarded, moreover, by more than one writer on the subject as the 'noblest' of all these, the basis for the rest. (Carruthers, 1990: 9; emphasis original)

It is clear that in addition to serving as a rhetorical tool to assist scholars, the tradition of medieval memory was even a matter of ethics, for,

> A person without a memory, if such a thing could be, would be a person without moral character and, in basic sense, without humanity' (Carruthers, 1990: 13).

To highlight the fundamental role of memoria, Carruthers considered memoria as 'one of the modalities of medieval culture (chivalry might be another)' so that it had a very long life as a continuing source and reference for human values and behaviour (Carruthers, 1990: 260). From this view, the European Middle Ages can be meaningfully spoken of as a 'memoria culture' (ibid).

Olson provided the following picture of medieval writers' conceptions of memory when commenting on the Carruthers (1990) work:

> … Medieval writers never thought of writing as a substitute for memory but rather as an aid to memory. Writing was thought of and used merely as a mnemonic device, a system of visible marks that could be used to check memory. Memory was thought of as 'writing' on the mind and memory was the primary instrument of thought. (Olson, 1994: 61)

Obviously, medieval scholars relied primarily on memory rather than written texts in most of their scholarly activities. Memory skills were valued as highly by scholastic masters as they were by ordinary monks. In his treatise on use of memory, Master Hugh of St Victor, a famous theologian and historian in the mid twelfth century, said, 'knowledge is a treasure and your heart is its strongbox' (Carruthers, 1990: 261; see also Clanchy, 1993: 172-173). Because the heart is a treasure of precious information, remembering is the process of extracting a particular item from it by recalling its 'colour, shape, position and placement' in the archive of the mind (Clanchy, 1993: 173). Having recommended remembering what one read, rather than depending on the written text (Clanchy, 1993: 193), Hugh set out ways to imprint the knowledge so that it can be easily retrieved. For example, he wrote at length on how to learn the psalter word for word by heart (cf. Carruthers, 1990: 261-266). Hugh's scholarly advice was followed in the schools and universities of medieval Europe and his instructions for memorizing texts were even thought to have 'helped to keep the textual traditions of important authoritative works more or less intact' (van Houts, 1999: 8).

One aspect of the formation of medieval literate habits which was thought to be peculiarly medieval was that 'medieval writing was mediated to the non-literate by the persistence of the habit of

reading aloud and by the preference, even among the educated, for listening to a statement rather than scrutinizing it in script' (Clanchy, 1993: 186). Despite the increasing use of documents, traditional oral procedures such as the preference for reading aloud rather than scanning a text silently with the eye, persisted through the Middle Ages and beyond (Clanchy, 1993: 2). This tradition, again, displayed similarity to that practiced by students in ancient China.

While many moderns view memory as something devoid of intellect, real thought or true learning, according to Carruthers, medieval people would not have understood our separation of memory from learning because

> [I]n their understanding of the matter, it was memory that made knowledge into useful experience, and memory that combined these pieces of information-become-experience into what we call 'ideas,' what they were more likely to call 'judgments.' (Carruthers, 1990: I)

This position might be a projection of medieval belief that 'all learning is based in remembering' (Carruthers, 1990: 259) or 'human learning is memorative [sic] in nature' (Carruthers, 1990: 260). Without retention in the memory, according to Hugh, there is no learning, no wisdom (Carruthers, 1990: 82).

Echoing and furthering this position, Miller (1963: 44-45), one of the founders of modern cognitive psychology, stated that learning can be seen as a process of acquiring smarter and richer mnemonic devices to represent information, encoding similar information into patterns, organizational principles, and rules which represent even material we have never before encountered, but which is 'like' what we do know, and thus can be 'recognised' or 'remembered'. This is obviously a perspective that medieval writers would have agreed on.

It is clear from the above discussion that text memorisation has been a salient feature of learning and scholarly tradition in the West at a particular time in history. Although scholars have always recognised that memory necessarily played a crucial role in pre-modern Western civilisation, 'insufficient attention has been paid to the pedagogy of memory, to what memory was thought to be, and how and why it was trained' (Carruthers, 1990: 8).

4. MEMORISATION IN THE MODERN WEST

Memorisation of textual materials was probably not an exceptional practice in nineteenth century UK education as is displayed in the episode in *Jane Eyre* (Bronte, 1847) where Jane Eyre explains how she learned French:

> Fortunately I had had the advantage of being taught French by a French lady; and as I had always made a point of conversing with Madame Pierrot, as often as I could, **and had, besides, during the last seven years, learnt a portion of French by heart daily** – applying myself to take pains with my accent, and imitating as closely as possible the pronunciation of my teacher – I had acquired a certain degree of readiness and correctness in the language, and was not likely to be much at a loss with Mademoiselle Adela.

This may well serve as an example of how ordinary the practice of memorisation was in nineteenth century UK education.

Even in the modern West, there are those who appreciate the benefits of memorisation of texts as a useful learning technique. For instance, a major western scholar said the following when offering advice on English teaching:

> *Memorising* or *Repetition* is especially good, because, by aid of it, the form and flame of expression adhere to the mind, and little by little taste is acquired, good literature becoming a

> sort of personal property of the recipient, to act as an antagonism to the mediocre. (Herbert Palmer 1930: 32 cited in Pennycook, 1996; emphasis original)

To elaborate on how text memorisation is positively viewed by some western scholars, in the remaining part of this section I will examine two studies: Stevick (1989), which analyses conversations with seven successful language learners from varied professional and L1 backgrounds, exploring the strategies they used and producing the result that most of them adopted imitation and memorisation as an important learning strategy; and Cook (1994), which is purely a conceptual work, attempting to restore a good name to learning by heart through speculating on the relevance to and implications for TESOL of 'intimate discourse'[3].

4.1. The Stevick Study

Stevick (1989) performed an interview-based case study with seven outstanding adult language learners from varied professional and L1 backgrounds. Data were entirely from hour-long recorded conversations the author had with the informants. The case of Bert, an L1-English learner of Chinese, aroused in me great interest. He was, according to Stevick (1989: 21), 'a young diplomat who had reached *an extraordinarily high level of competence* both in speaking and in reading Chinese' (my emphasis). I was fascinated by Bert's story not only because the author used the most unambiguous expressions to describe his high achievement in Chinese learning, but because many of the techniques he claimed to have adopted were typical of the well-known Audio-Lingual method (ALM) which has been challenged and largely replaced beginning in the late 1960s in the West. Apart from massive 'mimicry-memorisation' and intensive mechanical drills, Bert even took 'memorisation of texts' as one of the learning activities. His reaction to text memorisation was reflected in the following quotation:

> 'What about memorizing connected texts in a foreign language, such as dialogues or little stories or the like?' I asked. 'Is that something you thrive on, or something you can do but don't care for, something you detest?'
>
> 'Well, this is essentially what we were required to do in Chinese. **Within reason, of course**. I mean, one doesn't sit down and memorise these pages of text—of narrative, but there is something to be…'
>
> 'Memorisation wasn't something that particularly bothered you?'
>
> '**No. No, within reason**. By that I mean that one had to have assurance that this was what people really said. If I was going to spend the time on it, I wanted to be sure it was going to be worth the effort.'
>
> 'But memorizing twenty or twenty-five lines, or something like that…'
>
> '**No, that didn't bother me**.'
>
> 'You'd go home and do it, and bring it back the next day, and …'
>
> 'Yes, and I stress that because, with the text we're using in this language, I think all of us have a feeling that the language in the book is rather stilted and artificial, and not necessarily what we'd be saying.'
>
> 'That feature of the Chinese course was what gave you an instinct for what is actually said in the language—for how sentences are put together.'

[3] This was defined by Cook as 'discourse between people in minimal power relations which they would not wish to share with outsiders (1994: 134).

> 'Yes. In this language I feel that I just have countless patterns sort of swimming around in my head.' (1989: 29-30; emphasis [bold] added)

According to this episode, Bert, as a learner brought up in the Western culture of learning, seemed not bothered by this practice at all. Perceptions or beliefs habituated in the learners' mind for one reason or another, serve as, in Bartelt's (1997) term, 'folk models' which guide and motivate their learning and explain why they behave the way they do. Success with foreign language, as Stevick found in this study of successful learners, 'does not come by one simple formula' (1989: xi). Another issue that transpires from this episode is learners' awareness of their learning behaviour or strategy. A successful learner is not only a learning theorist (Brown, Bransford, & Campione, 1983), but also a reflective and pragmatic or purposeful learner. When he said he had to make sure that the text to be memorised should be 'what people really said', Bert apparently bore in his mind the purpose of oral communication. He seemed not to be spending time on a learning activity at will; rather, he weighed up carefully whether 'it was going to be worth the effort'. Instead of unconditionally accepting whatever the teacher promoted, he critically or selectively made use of text memorisation, i.e. committed to memory only texts he considered to be useful or rewarding.

What Stevick intends to say might be that the language sample should be carefully chosen to be tailored to the learners' proficiency level or focusing consistently on a single aspect of L2 use. Though failing to express his stance on text memorisation in comments on Bert's practice, Stevick was indeed an advocate of Audiolingual-style activities as he wrote in the summary chapter under the section title of *What I myself would do with a new language*: 'I would like to have (in fact, I would probably insist on having) a chance to do a fair amount of purely mechanical practice, something like the technique with the cuisenaire rods…' (1989: 148; emphasis original). More importantly, Stevick did not exclude memorisation of texts from 'mechanical practice' as he noted:

> I would even do a certain amount of memorisation, because memorisation is easy for me and because I have frequently been able to **use** in conversation **various adaptations of things I had learned by heart**. (1989: 148; emphasis added)

An important reason for Stevick's practice with text memorisation is that he was able to use what had been memorised flexibly (in his words, 'adaptations of things I had learned by heart') rather than '*sheng ban ying tao*' [a Chinese idiom literally meaning 'enforced move and inappropriate borrow'], a rote use or imitation regardless of practical situations or circumstantial surroundings. With respect to the relationship of (text) memorisation and creativity, this personal experience may lend a modest support to the argument that the memorisation of texts is not a pointless practice and it does not necessarily fail to lead to productive, original language use.

4.2. The Cook Study

Though repetition and learning by heart are, on the whole, discouraged in modern western education, Cook (1994) conducted a conceptual study in an attempt to restore a good name to this obsolete practice. He reported:

> I wish to argue the opposite… from a strong conviction based on experience as a language learner, and shared I believe by many others, that repetition and learning by heart, though condemned by pedagogic and acquisition theorists, are two of the most pleasurable, valuable, and efficient of language learning activities, and that they can bring with them sensations of those indefinable, overused yet still valuable goals for the language learner: being involved in the authentic and communicative use of language (1994: 133; emphasis added).

This strong feeling has led to his assertion that 'repetition and learning by heart should again form a substantial part of the language learning process' (1994: 139). He continued to argue that this practice should not be confined to child learners:

> Sometimes there is a place in the discourse of the adult second language acquirer, just as there is within the discourse of the child and the native speaker, for learning by heart and repeating, even without understanding. Knowing by heart makes it possible to enjoy speech without the burden of production. (1994: 139; emphasis added)

The argument that learning by heart and repetition can afford pleasure or enjoyment to even adult second language learners is apparently ingrained in his view that, language, apart from for the purpose of communication, is 'a source of comfort and an outlet for joy and exuberance' (1994: 138).

Cook's pronounced endorsement of learning by heart was in effect associated with a political educational movement in Britain advocating a 'returning to basics' which, in his case, happened to be 'rote learning of the English literary classics[4]' (1994: 134) in first language literacy education. According to Cook, the neglect of the importance of repetition in first language discourse can be attributed to four distorting factors in contemporary discourse analysis:

1. emphasis on creativity in language rather than memory
2. unrepresentative data
3. cultural bias against any apparently 'useless' language
4. a narrow view of language (and discourse) function

(for detailed argumentation, see 1994: 135-139) which has in turn led to the outlawing of repetition and learning by heart in the second language classroom.

To extract implications for TESOL from his discussion about 'intimate discourse', Cook stated:

> Repetition of substantial stretches of language which are known by heart, whether or not fully understood or used to communicate, gives the mind something to work on, so that gradually, if one wishes, they may yield up both their grammar and their meaning. (1994: 138)
>
> … …
>
> … as the known-by-heart is repeated many times, it may begin to make sense. Its native-like structures and vocabulary, analysed and separated out, become available for creative and original use. (1994: 139; emphasis added)

Albeit basing his argument on speculation and experience rather than on formal empirical investigation, Cook offered insights on the possibility of using learning by heart as a tool for implicit learning, which, though interesting, is well beyond the scope of the current discussion (for psycholinguistic analysis of memorised utterances and implicit learning, see Ellis, 2002; Williams, 1999). Interestingly, Cook's speculation seems to be in agreement with the house-hold Chinese saying – 'Master 300 Tang poems, and you become a poet yourself'[5] – what Gu (2003: 97) has called 'a folk theory of implicit learning'.

[4] Yet Cook's advocacy has remained controversial as it is considered to be associated with the furthering of discipline and conservative values (see 1994: 140 for more discussion).

[5] Translation from Gu (2003).

5. CONCLUSION

Building upon a stock of records which I have so far accessed, the paper argues that repetition and memorisation are by no means unique to Confucian heritage China. On the contrary, memorisation had been central in Anglophone western education up to the recent past. Moreover, there were positive voices for textual memorisation from Western scholars although it has been seriously attacked in mainstream education in the modern West. The fact warrants explication that why memorisation has long fallen from favour in the West while it has survived in China and is still being extensively practiced in foreign language learning and teaching.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is funded by the Scientific Research Foundation for the Returned Overseas Chinese Scholars, State Education Ministry, P. R. China.

REFERENCES

Bartelt, G. (1997). The ethnography of second language production. International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 35: 23-35.

Basham, A. L. (1954). The wonder that was India: A survey of the culture of the Indian Sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.

Bronte, C. (1847). Jane Eyre. London: Smith, Elder & Company.

Brown, A. L., Bransford, J. D., Ferrara, R. A., & Campione, J. C. (1983). Learning, remembering, and understanding. In P. H. Mussen (Ed.), Handbook of child psychology: Vol 3. Cognitive development (pp. 77–166). New York: Wiley.

Carruthers, M. (1990). The Book of Memory; A study of Memory in Medieval Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clanchy, M. T. (1982). Looking back from the invention of printing. Quarterly Journal of the Library Congress(Summer): 169-183.

Clanchy, M. T. (1993). From Memory to Written Record. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publisher.

Cook, G. (1994). Repetition and learning by heart: An aspect of intimate discourse, and its implications. ELT Journal 48(2):133-141.

Ellis, N. (2002). Frequency effects in language processing: A review with implications for theories of implicit and explicit language acquisition. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 24(1): 143-188.

Gu, Y.-Q. (2003). Fine brush and freehand: the vocabulary-learning art of two successful Chinese EFL learners. TESOL Quarterly, 37(1): 73-104.

Miller, G. A. (1963). Information and memory. Scientific American (August): 42-46.

Olson. (1994). The word in paper: The conceptual and cognitive implications of writing and reading. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others' words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. TESOL Quarterly, 30(2): 201-230.

Stevick, E. W. (1989). Success with Foreign Languages: Seven Who Achieved It and What Worked for Them. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Prentice Hall International.

Thompson, S. (Ed.) (1997) Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vols. 19).

Thompson, S. (2009). folk literature, Encyclopædia Britannica Available from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/212142/folk-literature

van Buitenen, J. A. B. (1997). Sacred texts Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 20, pp. 529-549).

van Houts, E. (1999). Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200. Houndmills and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Williams, J. N. (1999). Memory, Attention, and Inductive Learning. Studies in Second Language Acquisition 21(1): 1-48.