

# Demythologising Pennycook's Puzzle: Chinese Memorization in Foreign Language Education\*

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In an attempt to demythologise Pennycook's Puzzle proposed two decades ago, this paper revisits Chinese "rote learning" through the lens of memorisation of texts. Drawing on heuristics or insights culled from literature as well as the authors' own research, the author argues that repetitive learners are not equal to rote learners; flexible memorisers differ essentially from mere memorisers; and text memorisers are not necessarily unhappy learners.

*Keywords:* Chinese memorization, foreign language education, rote learning

## Introduction

It is certainly possible to identify those, among certain groups of international students, from countries with Confucian heritage (especially China), who achieve their often reported academic success apparently by using rote strategies and surface learning approaches. The scenario creates two evidently irreconcilable images of the Chinese learner: On the one hand, they are very much inclined towards memorization. While on the other hand, they are very much successful in their studies. In other words, although Western theorists predict that the learning strategies encouraged within Chinese education are counter-productive to learning, Chinese students clearly outperformed their Western counterparts in certain areas (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Accepting both statements amounts to a paradox: How is it possible that students with an orientation to rote learning, which is, negatively correlated with achievement, achieve so highly? In the case of foreign language learning, the paradox becomes this: Chinese students were learning "rather more effectively than they should have been, given what Western research predicted to be counter-productive teaching/learning environments" (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). As Pennycook (1996) wrote in reference to his Chinese colleague:

I recall ... talking to some of my Chinese colleagues about memorisation and language learning. I was arguing that although memorisation of texts might be a useful learning technique, it could never lead to productive, original language use (this, we have been taught to believe, is one of those "facts" of second language acquisition). I gave, as an example, one of our colleagues who was acknowledged as one of the most eloquent and fluent speaker in the department, suggesting that he could never have become so, if he had been a mere memoriser. The others smiled, for this other colleague was known not only as an excellent user of English but also as someone with a fine talent for memorising texts. ... I knew that when we sat and drank beer and talked philosophy, he was not speaking texts to me. How had he come to own the language as he did, when that had apparently been done by borrowing others' language?

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Pennycook's puzzle perhaps remains an enigma for many until today. Indeed, many a Chinese student has learning habits that are at odds with established Western perceptions and may even appal Western teachers and specialists—memorisation of texts, for instance. How can a seemingly harmful practice that may hinder the development of one's language learning potential to a degree be claimed to have contributed to a successful learner's foreign language learning? (Pennycook, 1996). Although the paradox of the Chinese learner has been amply explored in the literature of general education, there is a dearth of discussion of the same topic in foreign language education. In this article, the author, who received all her education in China with the exception of her Ph.D. and had been trained to memorise many English texts, argues that the Western apprehension of Chinese learners and Chinese way of learning reflected in Pennycook's puzzle can be caused by false perceptions which seem to only touch upon the surface without sufficient understanding. This article is devoted to demonstrating that there is much more going on under the surface in respect to terms such as "rote learning" (Phan, 2004) through the lens of memorisation of texts. Drawing on heuristics or insights culled from literature as well as the authors' own research, the following sections are organised around three vantage points:

1. Repetitive learners are not equal to rote learners;
2. Flexible memorisers differ essentially from mere memorisers;
3. Text memorisers are not necessarily unhappy learners.

### **Rote Learners or Repetitive Learners?**

An activity seen as inseparably related to memorisation is verbatim repetition, for repetition is the beginning of learning by heart (Cook, 1994). Repetition is defined by language learning strategists as "saying or doing something over and over: Listening to something several times; rehearsing; imitating a native speaker" (Oxford, 1990). It is a strategy used for practice for the purpose of "imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal" (Wenden, 1991). An "overt practice" connected to memorisation of texts is reading aloud (Phan, 2004), the use of which is still widespread in and out of English classrooms in China. Such apparently mechanical practice has long been considered "of negligible benefit for the students" (Gibson, 2008) in countries with Anglo-Saxon heritage. Probably the prime reason contributing to the disrepute of overt repetition is this: The working memory processing capacity required for decoding, recording, and articulation for the speaker is such that there is little room left for comprehension (Gibson, 2008). That is to say, the process of repetition is deprived of understanding and therefore tacitly regarded as a typical form of rote memorisation. Biggs (2008), however, challenged this conception by emphasising a difference between repetition and rote memorisation: The former is "repetitive learning" which is taken as a means of ensuring accurate recall, while the latter is "the mere exercise of memory without proper understanding."

Chinese students are found to use repetition for two different purposes: First, to create a "deep impression" and thence commit to memorisation; Second, to deepen or develop understanding by discovering new meaning (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000). It is argued that the process of repetition is not a simple process of repeating in order to memorise, but a prelude to understanding, or a form of understanding; it is a way to grasp the meaning of a text more fully (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Tse, 1996). That is to say, Chinese students tend to use repetition as a technical tool for enhancing both memorisation and understanding: In addition to assisting students to accurately recall information, repetitive learning enables the learner to attach meaning to the materials memorised. Western students, on the other hand, tend to use repetition only to check that they have really remembered something (Watkins, & Biggs, 2001). The best explication of the Chinese style of "understanding

through memorisation” may lie in the fact that “Chinese students typically think of understanding as usually a process that requires considerable mental effort” (repetitive reading aloud or silently, for instance) whereas “Western students see understanding as usually a process of sudden insight” (Watkins, & Biggs, 2001). Clearly, the Western perception of rote learning does not seem to capture adequately practices associated with memorisation and repetition in the Chinese learning culture (Marton, Dall’Alba, & Tse, 1996).

Some researchers have found that “Chinese students often use memorisation not as an end in itself, but as a path to understanding” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). If it is just a stage in the learning process, preceding understanding rather than stopping at rote learning, memorisation may be the best way to become familiar with a text for Chinese learners (Lee, 1996). In their in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese students, Marton, Wen, and Wong (2005) also reported, apart from “memorization that succeeds understanding,” there also exists the type of “memorization that precedes understanding” which means, the learner memorizes in the first instance in order to understand later. Indeed, the practices of “memorising what is understood” and “understanding through memorisation” (Marton, Dall’Alba, & Tse, 1996) have been naturally integrated into a learning process in which Chinese students try to understand and memorise simultaneously. Chinese memorisation, instead of being viewed as antithetical to understanding, as it might appear to uncritical observers, should rather be viewed as a way of gaining deep understanding of a topic through respect for and mastery of a key text (Pennycook, 1996). With this in mind, we might be in a better position to understand the outcome of Biggs’s (1996) research that Chinese learners may be repetitive learners rather than rote learners. In effect, understanding complexity requires repetition, in any culture, but it is forgotten in the West; repetitive learning tends to be perceived as mindless rote learning (Biggs, 1997).

### **Mere Memorisers or Flexible Memorisers?**

A further misconception about Chinese way of learning is that textual memorisation is meant as a tool for copying or equal to “*si ji ying bei*” (literally meaning “dead and inflexible memorisation,” which can serve as a perfect Chinese version for rote learning), a notoriously deficient and backward learning method condemned in Chinese education. In sharp contrast with “*si ji ying bei*,” “*huo xue huo yong*” (literally meaning “flexible learning and creative use”) is a highly valued practice that “memorisation is meant to support” (Liu, 2005). That is to say, good memorising practice aims to help the learner to use what is memorised for creative construction in his/her own production. On the contrary, to memorise for the mere sake of memorisation is considered as a bad practice, if not pointless altogether. A Chinese-American scholar, Liu (2005) made a strong point by discussing the purpose of memorizing good writing. He asserted that “memorizing good writing to improve writing is very similar to the memorisation of the multiplication tables, a practice that meant to help one to do multiplication more efficiently.” A major role of memorising good writing in Chinese, Liu (2005) continued, was to

help the learner to appreciate and become familiar with effective rhetorical styles and useful writing techniques that the memorised writing uses, so the learner can use them in his/her own writing in the future.

If English text memorisation is understood in this way, Pennycook’s puzzle is solved. Pennycook is right in saying that his Chinese colleague could never become an eloquent and fluent speaker of English “if he had been a mere memoriser.” On the contrary, he must be a specimen of “*huo xue huo yong*,” being able to use bits of what is memorized in his own language and output them with a high degree of flexibility.

This idea of flexible use of memorised writing is also precisely alluded to in the house-hold Chinese saying “shou du tang shi san bai shou, bu hui xie shi ye hui yin” (which literally means “Memorise 300 Tang poems and one can at least recite them if unable to compose a poem of his own”). It seems that a large amount of text memorisation may lead to two levels of achievement: The lower level is to accurately recall what is memorised, and the higher one is to take advantage of the “useful writing techniques that the memorised writing uses” (Liu, 2005) for one’s own disposal. This is, in some way, analogous to the implicit learning of progressing from a quantitative change to a qualitative change as the known-by-heart, which, according to Cook (1994), is “repeated many times, it may begin to make sense, and its native-like structures and vocabulary, analysed and separated out, become available for creative and original use.” It needs to be pointed out that the folk theory of implicit learning reflected in above-mentioned Chinese saying is by no means culturally specific, rather than a view shared by a number of Western scholars. For instance, the chief value in memorisation of texts, from an audiolingualist viewpoint, is to provide the student with “authentic sentences that he can vary and expand and eventually use in many situations” (Lado, 1964). It is believed that,

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.

Stevick, an English teacher and foreign language teaching methodologist, claims that he will even do a certain amount of memorisation, because, to quote him, “memorisation is easy for me and I have frequently been able to use in conversation various adaptations of things I had learned by heart” (1989). Such an approach to mentality of memorization certainly has pragmatic value, since it fosters the kind of active or flexible memorisation that will be rewarded by possible use of bits of the known by heart in new situations.

### **Miserable Memorisers or Happy Memorisers?**

Another misconception that needs to be illuminated is that text memorisers must be unable to enjoy the process of learning, since recitation of a text can be a formidable task for all. When it comes to memorising material in a foreign language, which is much more difficult than memorising it in the native one, therefore taking too much time and effort (Lado, 1964), this task is reckoned with “hopeless,” because it is understood that the task of memorisation usually “requires hours of tiring work, and is not really an easy way out” (Sivell, 1980). However, we tend to be oblivious of the fact that memorisation is a process at which different people have different degrees of ability and toward which people’s attitude may vary tremendously (Stevick, 1982). Indeed, Gairns and Redman (1986) remarked that:

In the early stages of language learning, repetition gives the students the opportunity to manipulate the oral and written forms of language items, and many learners derive a strong sense of progress and achievement from this type of activity.

This is obviously an outcome which Gibson (2008) also anticipated when looking into reading aloud (RA) that his reckoning may help some anxious students to feel more able to speak (Gibson, 2008). Purposeful memorisation may or may not enable one to speed up his/her progress in leaning, but at least it may help learners to “sound more confident” (Duong, 2006) or make them feel they are stepping forward whenever they have memorised a bit of material. A sense of attainment or satisfaction is thus achieved. The following is an excerpt from the transcription of the author’s interview with a college student in China who heavily employs memorisation of texts in his English study:

I feel happy after I memorise a bit of text, because I feel proud of myself being able to do it. I have a special sense of achievement whenever I perform better than my classmates [in classroom interaction]. The feeling that I am better than others [in speaking English] motivates me to learn more [texts] by heart. I enjoy the process most of the time, because I can get something out of it.

Thus, the feeling that he has made progress affords the learner the kind of adequacy and self-confidence, which is crucial to morale. This positive psychology built through memorizing texts might be taken as an advantage compared with relying only on natural retention as result of exposure to enough samples of the language, which is theoretically ideal, but for many people, especially adult learners, also means very slow improvement which means discouragement and frustration (Stevick, 1982).

Another aspect why repetition and learning by heart are poured scorn on in Anglophone culture is that language form is valued less highly than the meaning it intends to convey. As Cook (1994) contended:

Contemporary Western culture is perhaps unusual in the lack of importance it attaches to the form of words. What matters in discourse, it appears, is its meaning or intention, and the purpose of discourse is seen only as the “transmission” of meanings and intentions.

In accepting the legitimacy of priority placed on meaning, however, it is important to avoid denying any positive aspect of focusing on form. It is again forgotten in the West that, in addition to performing the function of communication of meaning, language is also “a source of comfort and an outlet for joy and exuberance” (Cook, 1994). In a sense, repetition may serve to satisfy this human need to a certain extent. Moreover, repetition can offer a conduit to savour or enjoy the aesthetic subtlety created by manoeuvring forms of words. Not surprisingly, repetition and learning by heart, if made an experience personally meaningful to the practitioner, are considered “two of the most pleasurable, valuable, and efficient of language learning activities” (Cook, 1994). Perhaps foreign language learners, according to a participant in an interview study conducted by the author, may need to “be guided to appreciate the beauty of language, so that the process of memorisation becomes that of enjoying the delicateness of language rather than being forced to endure what they may think is pointless” (Yu, 2010).

### Conclusions

Having being immersed in a different cultural conditioning of learning, Western teachers and scholars have long been baffled why some Chinese learners of English “come to own the language ... when that had apparently been done by borrowing others’ language?” (Pennycook, 1996). In this paper, the author approaches the conundrum through delving deeply into successful Chinese learners of English, who, actually, do and think when practicing memorization of texts, a learning method borrowed from traditional Chinese literacy education. It appears that a seemingly “unrewarding,” if not “harmful,” but highly valued way of learning in China may not necessarily be unable to lead to a productive and original language use, if applied appropriately and combined with other learning strategies. If Chinese investment of endeavour in mastery of English through memorisation indeed pays off, the memorising process must be inseparably related to high levels of understanding, flexibility, and motivation among other things. The speculation has been corroborated by the finding of relevant studies (Marton, Wen, & Nagle, 1996) that Chinese memorisation practices are virtually integrated with understanding and enjoyment.

It has been repeatedly reported in the literature that Chinese students have been accustomed to their traditional way of learning and find it uncomfortable to be in a Communicative Language Teaching

(CLT)-dominant classroom (Rao & Lei, 2014). If this situation persists in years to come, we may need to invite the methodologists and teachers to consider—in addition to asking how CLT can be applied to Chinese classroom—how traditional learning method can be ameliorated, i.e., how repetition, recitation, mimicry, and memorising may be squared with more active and participatory approaches to develop communicative skills (Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

Such a recommendation, of course, is in alignment with the irresistible trend in language education today, namely, a learner-centred manner of teaching, which calls for the inclusion of and the respect for the learner. Central to this conception is the argument that foreign language teaching is a process which “aims to empower learners by putting their experiences and knowledge at the centre of the pedagogical process” (Brooks-Lewis, 2009), and that language learning is a “lived experience intimately involved with people’s sense of worth and identity” (Cook, 2003). It could therefore be argued that, for learners who consider text memorisation “a learning activity which greatly expedites the kinds of experience which promote acquisition” (Stevick, 1982), and those who have other sufficient reasons to do it (either for being not willing to fritter away a fine talent of memorization or for achieving a sense of progress and accomplishment) or do not mind doing it at all, the teacher might be encouraged to use it as one of the many tools in his/her teaching kit. It is, of course, the teachers’ professional commitment to explore practical techniques (oral presentation, for instance) as to minimise the intrinsic side-effects of the practice in foreign language teaching.

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1. This is indicated partly by the test results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2011. American students were mired in the middle: 17th in reading, 23rd in science, and 31st in math—17th overall while students in Shanghai blew everyone else away, achieving a decisive first place in all three categories. This event provoked anxious ruminations throughout the U.S. including President Obama who noted that the U.S. has arrived at a “Sputnik moment”: The humbling realization that another country is pulling ahead in a contest we’d become used to winning (Murphy, 2011).

2. It is reported in Ding’s (2007) study that text memorisation and imitation are regarded as the most effective methods of learning English by some successful learners who had won prizes in nationwide English speaking competitions and debate tournaments in China.

3. Although general ELT methodology literature does not applaud the practice, recent research recommends using reading aloud for the purposes of aiding the acquisition of prosodic features of English and being employed as a technique for autonomous learning and helping some anxious students to feel more able to speak (Gibson, 2008).

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