

What good is the “understanding” if you “can’t remember” what you learnt?

According to Ausubel’s theory, rote learning is abstract and is not considered to be a valuable way of incorporating information into our minds. It could also lead to misrepresentations of the learnt material and false analogies between the current learning and previous knowledge. In the rote learning, the learning mainly focuses on transferring the content into the cognition and does not rely on relating the new information contextually with the old information already present in the memory. This could not only lead to forgetfulness of the material but may also interact with the learning abilities in future. For instance, if I learn about Ohm’s law without understanding and relating to the concept of current, resistance and volt. I might achieve some success in scoring well in exams but in the long run, this will be a meaningless learning as I did not fully understand the logic behind it and the traces of information present after this form of learning might interfere with the new information accumulation in future.

I agree to a large extent that “rote learning” does not promote the application-based and meaningful learning, leading to forgetfulness of the material. But in certain contexts, this has proved to be an unavoidable and useful methods in pedagogy. For instance, the language teaching research conducted by Mitchell and Martin (1997) explains how the concept of genders of nouns (p. 21) could only be taught by rote learning to middle school foreign learners. Here, the pupils are asked to memorize the genders with no meaningful learning involved here. To better understand, let us consider this example: a pen in French is “*le stylo*” and has a masculine gender. The gender of different nouns must be learnt with no previous knowledge or understanding of the concept. Moreover, in this case, a learner is required to use “rote learning” technique if they want to excel linguistically.

Similarly, while learning French grammar during my middle school, the teacher relied largely on imparting concepts through repetition (an extension of rote learning). Reflecting on my personal experience of foreign language learning – one of the most challenging grammatical concepts is verb conjugation (*in French, the verb conjugation differs with every subject pronoun*), the pedagogical methodology majorly relied on rote learning as the instructor would hand out the rules of conjugation to students and asked us to memorize and practice by writing.

Even if I had no idea what I was doing and why I was doing at that point of time, it just made my foundation of French grammar extremely strong. I could very well apply this theoretical knowledge in the practical phase in later years. So, at least in this context, if a user needs to use the correct syntax, rote learning would be beneficial. Hence, rote-learning would not really be an obstacle in language acquisition skills.

So, rather than completely negating the “rote learning”, we should also understand its benefits and promote it whenever required. An instructor might adhere to this technique for foreseen advantages at a later stage which the learners might feel otherwise.

References:

1. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.826.1849&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
2. Novak, J. D. (1993). [A view on the current status of Ausubel’s assimilation theory of learning]