

Teacher vignette

Spacing and retrieval practice in the French classroom

Teacher vignettes are short stories from practitioners about how they use an evidence-based practice in their classroom. The reflection questions at the end are designed to encourage your thinking about how you could adapt aspects of the practice into your own setting.

Lesson context

This teaching vignette relates to planning French lessons for Year 7 and 8 beginner learners. Spaced retrieval practice helps my students with their long-term retention of vocabulary, which is important as many of them go on to study the language in their senior schooling years. The example below is from a unit about daily life, where the focus was to describe everyday routines in present tense.

Using ... sentence building blocks takes away the strain on their memories by breaking the learning down into manageable blocks ... I find this helps students to access their learning next time with more ease.

Planning for spaced retrieval

When I plan my units, my first step is to identify the French vocabulary that students will need to know. I have a spreadsheet that I call a 'sentence builder' that separates the vocabulary into different sets depending on where they go in a sentence (such as subject, noun, verb). I use this sentence builder to form the building blocks of the unit. I do this by dividing the focus vocabulary into 3 teaching sequences, each going for about a week, to give my students more time to practise the new words.

In this unit, the first set of vocabulary focused on the time of day ("In the morning at 8 o'clock"). I spent time across 4 lessons targeting this vocabulary, while also bringing in other French vocabulary that we had learnt earlier in the term, in this case numbers and time telling. I used a low-stakes quiz at the end of the fourth lesson to assess how much of the vocabulary my students were able to use.

Once I was sure that my students had mastered the first set of vocabulary, we moved onto learning the second set, which was about how we get ready. As I explicitly taught the vocabulary for things such as getting dressed, I had students recall the previous vocabulary set and asked them to apply this in a more complex sentence (“In the morning at 8 o’clock, I get dressed”).

After assessing my students to make sure that they had mastered this second set of vocabulary, I moved onto the third set. Students combined the first 2 sets of vocabulary to describe more actions in the present tense, which helped them to retrieve their prior learning of tense and activities (“In the morning at 8 o’clock I get dressed, I eat breakfast and then I go to school”).

In between these spaced lessons of explicit vocabulary teaching, we engaged in lots of different learning activities so that students could practise what they had learnt.

How does this help students remember the French vocabulary?

Giving students lots of opportunities to become comfortable speaking in another language helps them commit the language to long-term memory. The more vocabulary you teach at once, the more overwhelming it is, making it more likely students will forget parts of it. Using these sentence building blocks takes away the strain on their memories by breaking the learning down into manageable blocks, helping them commit the first set to memory before we move on. I find this helps students to access their learning next time with more ease. This is in line with what the research says about how the brain works.

These practices also allow me to clearly track my students’ progress and gives them lots of time to practise. Many of my students are quite nervous about using new vocabulary, so spacing out the learning and reintroducing words through games and other conversation activities increases their confidence. My students love using online quiz platforms in independent practice, and we play lots of games that focus on using new vocabulary in different ways.

Reflection questions

How are spacing and retrieval practices used together to create multiple opportunities for students to practice their French language skills?

How did this teacher consider the cognitive load of students?

How do you ensure that you are not overwhelming students with information?

What principles of spacing and retrieval practice could you draw from this vignette to apply in your own teaching?

What amendments would you have to make for your teaching area?