

- For upper primary teachers (Years 5-6)

COGNITIVE SCIENCE: MEMORY & VOCABULARY

Why waiting a week to review new words beats reviewing them straight away

A Canadian classroom study (Ontario, Grade 5, age around 10), worth watching for UK Years 5-6 practice.

In one real classroom study, ten-year-olds who reviewed new vocabulary a week after first learning it recalled almost three times as many word meanings five weeks later than those who reviewed it again straight away, using exactly the same amount of teaching time.

● ● ● Evidence: Promising

Independent UK classroom replications across subjects, larger schools, and multiple spacing intervals to test the dose-response relationship.

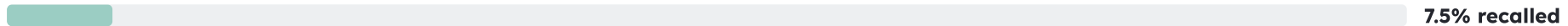


WHAT HAPPENED

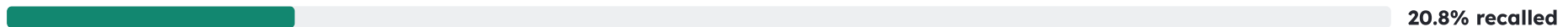
A week's gap before the second look made words stick

In two real Grade 5 classes in Ontario, Canada, the regular classroom teacher taught 39 learners eight new English words. Four words were reviewed again less than a minute after first teaching; the other four were reviewed again a full week later, with exactly the same 10 minutes of formal learning time either way. Five weeks after that second review, learners were tested on all eight definitions. They recalled almost three times as many meanings from the words spaced a week apart as from the words reviewed straight away, a statistically reliable difference ($p = .004$).

Reviewed straight away



Reviewed a week later



Scores are the percentage of definitions correctly recalled five weeks after the second review. Both sets of words were equally hard to start with (about 61% correct straight after first teaching in each), so the gap wasn't down to easier words landing in the spaced set. The two classes performed at a similar level too, so their results are combined here.

How the review was built into the lesson

1

Same lesson, same length

Formal learning time was 10 minutes in both conditions. Only the gap before the second look changed, not the amount of teaching.

2

Definitions repeated, not just seen

Both times, the teacher read the definitions aloud from an overhead, and learners wrote each one down and used the word in a sentence.

3

One thing changed, everything else stayed the same

The same teacher ran every session, using the usual whole-class routine. Only the length of the gap before the second look differed.

Across your subjects and classes

This study tested one week's gap for vocabulary in two Canadian primary classes. What follows are sensible ways the same "space it out" idea could work in other subjects and UK classrooms, worth trying, not proven.

Subject	How it could translate
English / vocabulary	Give a short recall quiz on last week's new words before introducing this week's list, instead of only reviewing them on the day you taught them.
Maths	Open a lesson with a few questions using last week's method as a starter, before moving on to a new topic.
Science	Start a new topic with a two-minute "what do you remember" task on key terms from a week earlier.
Humanities / topic	Ask learners to write one sentence reminding themselves of last week's key idea before starting today's lesson.

Adapt it to the class in front of you

Quieter or less confident classes

Use a short written recall task rather than a cold-call question, so revisiting old material doesn't feel like being put on the spot.

Top set or higher-attaining group

An easy place to start: a quick, low-stakes recall quiz on last week's key vocabulary or terms before moving on to new content.

Livelier or lower-attaining classes

Keep the gap short and predictable, such as the same day each week, so the routine feels familiar rather than another new demand.

EAL or SEND learners

The original study's task was exactly this: revisiting new-word definitions. Keep new vocabulary on a weekly recall cycle rather than teaching it once and moving on.

A real classroom study, promising but small

Developing

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the idea. A real, teacher-delivered classroom study with a sound design and a statistically reliable, medium-sized effect, but a small sample tested in one school on one topic.

- Small and single-site: 39 learners in two classes at one Ontario school. We don't yet know how reliably the same size of effect would show up across many schools or a whole year group.
- Vocabulary only: the study tested new-word definitions specifically. It doesn't tell us whether the same one-week gap works as well for maths methods, science ideas, or extended writing.
- One gap tested: the study compared "almost immediately" against "a week later". It doesn't tell us whether two days, two weeks, or a month would work better or worse.

What that means for you: the wider idea, that spacing reviews out over time improves memory, is well established across a much larger body of research. Treat this specific classroom result as an encouraging, real-world illustration of it, worth testing with your own classes rather than assumed to transfer automatically to every subject.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Pick one thing you taught this week. About a week from now, before moving straight on to something new, give learners a short, low-stakes recall check on it.

Try it and watch: notice whether learners recall it better a few weeks from now than the topics you only ever covered once. That's your own evidence, not just the study's. The researchers' own conclusion: *"merely reorganizing the structure of classroom lessons, without increasing overall time spent on teaching, is sufficient to improve student performance on a later vocabulary-learning test."*

Go deeper

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