

The importance of retrieval practice

By **Claire Stoneman**

Retrieval practice is something you're likely to come across in many schools and it's becoming more and more popular in schools in England. As Professor Robert Coe reminds us, retrieval practice is strongly supported by over a hundred years of research and is one of only two learning techniques rated by Dunlosky as having high utility for classroom practice. There's a huge amount of research to support its use and yet like many things that seem so simple in teaching it has to be done really well or it could throw up a few calamitous pitfalls.

So why is retrieving prior knowledge a useful thing to do?

It enables the children to see their learning going somewhere that lessons aren't just weird little modularised bite-size chunks of learning but part of a golden thread of knowledge and Barak Rosenshine suggests that teachers begin their lesson with review of prior learning for two reasons:

1. It's a practice recalling previously learnt material, thereby strengthening the ability to recall it in the future.
2. To link new material to that which has come before.

So retrieval practice can be an exceptionally useful thing to do at the start of a lesson. It's not simply recap, in other words, going back over something but it's about the children actively trying to recall knowledge from their long-term memory.

It also helps their children to develop schemas that we can signpost. In their book 'What every teacher needs to know about psychology', David Didau and Nick Rose say that a schema has to be thought of as an organizing framework representing some aspect of the world and a system of organising that information. Let's think about that in practice for a minute. Imagine I have taught Stevenson's 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde' to my Year 11 group. We've probably spent lots of time exploring the nature of mankind, secrets, duality, all sorts of interesting things. So when we move on to power and conflict poetry and I teach them Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias' and they come across the noun 'visage', the children will have a schema of connections about concealment upon which to draw to help them unpick the noun 'visage'. If we can help our pupils make explicit links between these different lessons, the better they are able to develop secure schemas. And retrieval practice can really help with this.

So how can you incorporate retrieval practices in your lessons? You can start your lesson with a low stakes quiz. They're effective, efficient and predictable. Pupils know what's coming and so it can free up working memory. Your lesson becomes a tool and an effective routine. There are of course other ways to take advantage of retrieval practice and although Rosenshine talks about using the start of the lesson to review previously learnt material, don't think that this is the only opportunity to make those things sometimes there will be opportunities and lessons to naturally recap on knowledge learnt in a different unit or lesson. At other times you'll want to plan in opportunities. Both are fine and really useful.