

QUESTION: If our retention is 25 percent, how good can we get by training?

DR. NICHOLS: This is an excellent question. I am awfully glad you raised it. I think it is right at the heart of the whole discussion. We have to do this thing by measuring the immediate comprehension and recognize that there will probably be a severe fall-off in that comprehension level. So what we try to do is to raise it from 50 percent in the immediate listening situation up to close to 100, and then expect a 50 percent fall-off. Now, with our freshman trainee group, we have never failed to get at least 25 percental ranks gain in listening proficiency from the training received in a single term. That would be about 20 class hours devoted to it. With 60 adults in a night class I had, business and professional people, the gain was 42 percental ranks in listening proficiency from the training received.

Now, this may sound pretty good to some of you. It is not as good as we are doing in reading. We have better techniques in reading. We have more research behind it. And many times we can multiply by 3 or 4 in reading rate and comprehension, whereas we only double, essentially, the listening rate and comprehension.

Now, I think implied in your question also, if I may go a bit deeper into it, is the question: How can a person flatten that forgetting curve? Let me draw a picture of it on the blackboard. Now, essentially, that is an outline of a forgetting curve. There is always an early downward swoop, and then a leveling off. The ideal thing for any school teacher or instructor, of course, would be to be able to flatten that forgetting curve. If we could get a flattened-curve distribution instead of this fall-off, it would leave a tremendous impact on all learning.

As far as I know, there are only two ways to flatten the forgetting curve. One is through repetition. When I was a kid, I said over and over, playing on the sidewalk, "Hi diddle diddle, the cat's in the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon." For 40 years I have tried to forget that stupid thing. I cannot forget it, because it was drilled in through repetition. The best way to flatten a forgetting curve, I think, is to repeat the material learned right after you learn it, and then periodically, every hour or every day, for a few hours or a few days, and then you cannot get it out, even if you want to. It is going to stay there.