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MATHEMATICAL MODELING OF KNOWLEDGE ACCUMULATION IN MATHEMATICS LEARNING DURING STANDARDIZED TEST PREPARATION

Fozil U. Sulaymonov

PhD in Physics and Mathematics, Associate Professor

Affiliation: Head of the Department of Mathematics,

Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Jizzakh, Uzbekistan

e-mail: fozil.sulaymonov@mail.ru

Dushabayeva Diana Baxtiyorovna

Affiliation: Jizzakh State Pedagogical University

named after Abdulla Qadiri, Uzbekistan

e-mail: dusabaevadiana70@gmail.com

Abstract

Standardized examinations — the SAT, the GRE, and their analogues — test something harder to measure than content recall: the capacity to reason quantitatively under pressure, to interpret unfamiliar data, to hold several logical constraints in mind simultaneously. Preparing students for this kind of assessment demands more than a syllabus of practice problems. It requires a coherent theory of how mathematical knowledge actually develops.

This study proposes and analyzes a mathematical model describing the growth of mathematical competence over time. The model treats knowledge acquisition as a nonlinear process that asymptotically approaches a theoretical ceiling — a pattern consistent with decades of empirical work on skill learning. To test its applicability, we conducted a ten-week pedagogical experiment with sixty undergraduate students divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group followed a structured preparation program combining diagnostic assessment, guided problem-solving, and continuous instructor feedback.

The results were clear-cut. Students in the experimental group outperformed their peers on every assessment — final scores of 74.2 versus 63.5 — with the gap widening as the course progressed. Model parameters, fitted from empirical data, revealed a substantially higher learning rate in the structured group ($\alpha = 0.106$) compared with the conventional format ($\alpha = 0.082$). These findings suggest that mathematical modeling is not merely a descriptive convenience: it can serve as a practical instrument for designing and evaluating instructional programs.

Keywords: mathematics education; mathematical modeling; knowledge acquisition; learning curve; standardized testing; pedagogical experiment

Introduction

Mathematical literacy has become, over the past several decades, something approaching a prerequisite for serious intellectual work across almost every academic discipline. This is reflected in the architecture of international assessments. The SAT and the GRE do not test arithmetic fluency for its own sake; they test whether a student can analyze a quantitative relationship, extract relevant information from a complex presentation, and apply mathematical reasoning to a problem they have never seen before. These are not skills that emerge from drilling formula sheets.

Educators who take this seriously face a genuine methodological challenge. How should instruction be organized to produce not just rote competence but flexible, transferable mathematical thinking? And how can we know, during the course of instruction rather than only at the end, whether a particular approach is working?

Research in mathematics education has long recognized that learning follows a nonlinear path. Students typically make rapid early gains as they acquire basic concepts and procedural fluency; progress then decelerates as mastery deepens and the remaining gaps become harder to close. This phenomenon — the learning curve — has been documented extensively in educational psychology. What remains underdeveloped is the use of formal mathematical models to describe this process quantitatively in the specific context of test preparation.

The present study addresses this gap directly. We develop a model of knowledge accumulation, fit its parameters to empirical data from a structured pedagogical experiment, and examine what both the model and the data can tell us about how to teach mathematics more effectively.

The study pursues four objectives:

- to construct a mathematical model of knowledge growth during instruction;
- to derive and interpret model parameters from empirical assessment data;
- to conduct a pedagogical experiment evaluating the effectiveness of structured instruction;
- to compare empirical learning trajectories with the model's theoretical predictions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study combined theoretical modeling with empirical investigation. Sixty undergraduate students enrolled in a mathematics preparation course — all of them planning to take an international standardized examination — volunteered to participate. They were randomly assigned to two groups of thirty.

The control group followed a conventional format: classroom instruction followed by independent practice. The experimental group worked within a structured framework built around four components: diagnostic assessment at the outset; guided problem-solving sessions emphasizing conceptual reasoning rather than procedural repetition; regular instructor feedback; and a deliberate increase in task complexity over the course of ten weeks. Three formal assessments were administered: at Week 0 (baseline), Week 5 (mid-term), and Week 10 (final).

Mathematical Model of Knowledge Accumulation

Let $K(t)$ denote the total test score of a student after t instructional sessions, and let $\Delta K(t) = K(t) - K_0$ denote the cumulative gain from the baseline score K_0. We model this gain as:

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$$\Delta K(t) = K_{max} \cdot (1 - e^{(-\alpha t)})$$

where K_{max} is the theoretical maximum achievable gain within the instructional program, $\alpha > 0$ is the individual learning rate, and t is the number of sessions completed. The full score trajectory is therefore:

$$K(t) = K_0 + K_{max} \cdot (1 - e^{(-\alpha t)})$$

The derivative $\frac{dK}{dt} = \alpha \cdot K_{max} \cdot (1 - e^{(-\alpha t)})$ gives the instantaneous learning rate at any point in the program. At $t = 0$, this equals $\alpha \cdot K_{max}$ — the initial learning velocity. As t increases, the rate decays exponentially, reflecting the diminishing returns that characterize skill acquisition near the ceiling.

Parameter Estimation

Model parameters were fitted analytically from the two post-baseline assessment points ($t = 5$ and $t = 10$). Given measurements ΔK_5 and ΔK_{10}, the system:

$$\Delta K_5 = K_{max}(1 - e^{(-5\alpha)})$$

$$\Delta K_{10} = K_{max}(1 - e^{(-10\alpha)})$$

yields, by substitution $x = e^{(-5\alpha)}$:

$$x = \frac{\Delta K_{10}}{\Delta K_5} - 1$$

$$\alpha = \frac{-\ln(x)}{5}, \qquad K_{max} = \frac{\Delta K_5}{(1 - x)}$$

For the control group ($\Delta K_5 = 13.4$, $\Delta K_{10} = 22.3$):

$$x = \frac{22.3}{13.4} - 1 = 0.664$$

$$\alpha\_c = \frac{-\ln(0.664)}{5} = \frac{0.409}{5} / 5 \approx 0.0818$$

$$K_{max}\_c = \frac{13.4}{(1 - 0.664)} = \frac{13.4}{0.336} \approx 39.9 \text{ pts}$$

For the experimental group ($\Delta K_5 = 20.2$, $\Delta K_{10} = 32.1$):

$$x = \frac{32.1}{20.2} - 1 = 0.589$$

$$\alpha\_e = \frac{-\ln(0.589)}{5} = \frac{0.529}{5} \approx 0.1058$$

$$K_{max}\_e = \frac{20.2}{(1 - 0.589)} = \frac{20.2}{0.411} \approx 49.2 \text{ pts}$$

An additional diagnostic metric is the half-saturation time $t_1/_2$ — the number of sessions required to reach half of K_{max}. Setting $\Delta K(t) = \frac{K_{max}}{2}$ and solving:

$$\frac{t_1}{2} = \frac{\ln(2)}{\alpha}$$

For the control group: $\frac{t_1}{2} = \frac{0.693}{0.0818} \approx 8.5$ weeks. For the experimental group: $\frac{t_1}{2} = \frac{0.693}{0.1058} \approx 6.5$ weeks. In other words, the structured program reached its midpoint of maximal growth two full weeks earlier.

Results

Assessment Scores

Before instruction began, both groups completed a diagnostic test. Starting points were effectively identical: the control group averaged 41.2 points, the experimental group 42.1. Whatever differences emerged over the following ten weeks could not be attributed to pre-existing ability gaps.

Table 1. Assessment scores and gains by group

Assessment point	Control group	Experimental group	Difference
Week 0 (baseline)	41.2	42.1	+0.9
Week 5 (mid-term)	54.6	62.3	+7.7
Week 10 (final)	63.5	74.2	+10.7
Total gain	+22.3	+32.1	—

At the midpoint assessment, after five weeks, the groups had already diverged by 7.7 points. By the end of the course, the control group finished at 63.5 — a gain of 22.3 — while the experimental group reached 74.2, a gain of 32.1. Both groups progressed; only one progressed substantially.

Model Parameters and Fitted Trajectories

Table 2 summarizes the estimated model parameters for each group, derived from the analytical procedure described above.

Table 2. Estimated model parameters

Parameter	Control group	Experimental group
α (learning rate)	0.0818	0.1058
K_{max} (maximum gain)	39.9 pts	49.2 pts
Score ceiling ($K_0 + K_{max}$)	81.1 pts	91.3 pts

$\frac{dK}{dt}$ at t=0 (initial rate)	3.26 pts/session	5.20 pts/session
Half-saturation $t_{\frac{1}{2}}$	8.47 weeks	6.55 weeks

The learning rate in the experimental group (α = 0.106) was approximately 29% higher than in the control group (α = 0.082). This difference propagates through every derived quantity: initial learning velocity, half-saturation time, and the theoretical score ceiling. The structured program did not merely shift scores upward by a fixed amount — it changed the shape of the learning trajectory.

Figures

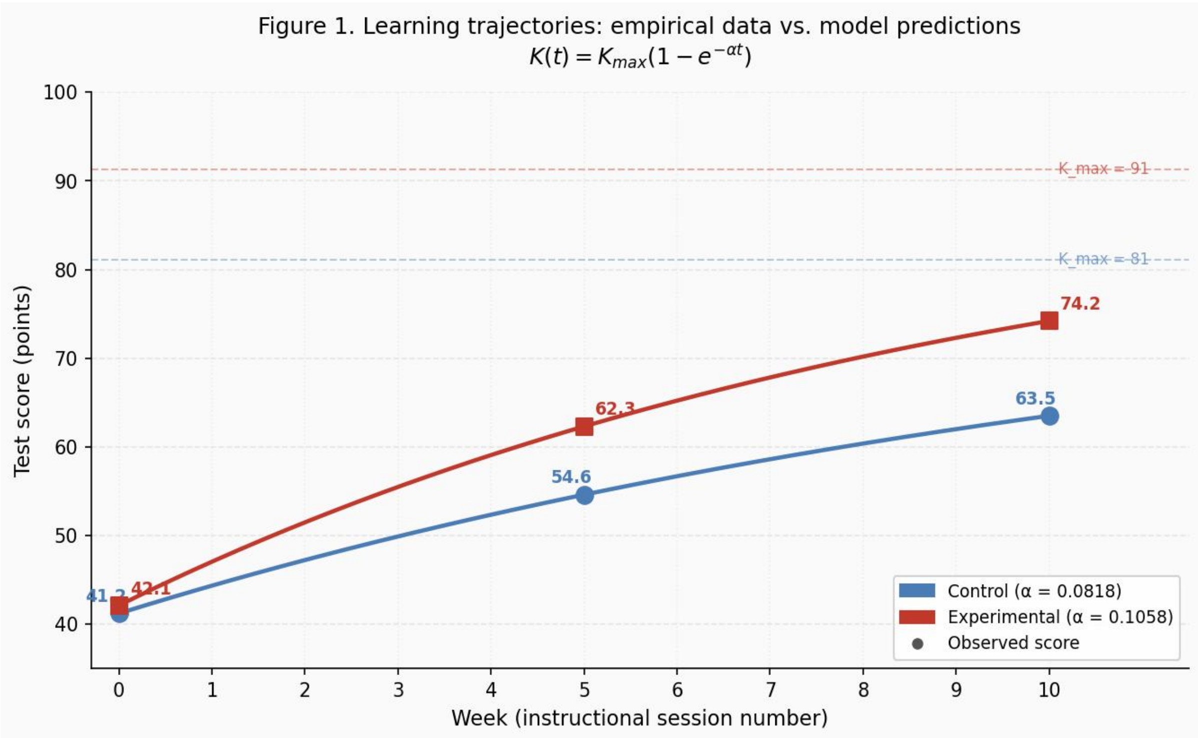

Figure 1. Learning trajectories: empirical scores (markers) vs. model predictions (curves). Dashed lines indicate theoretical score ceilings.

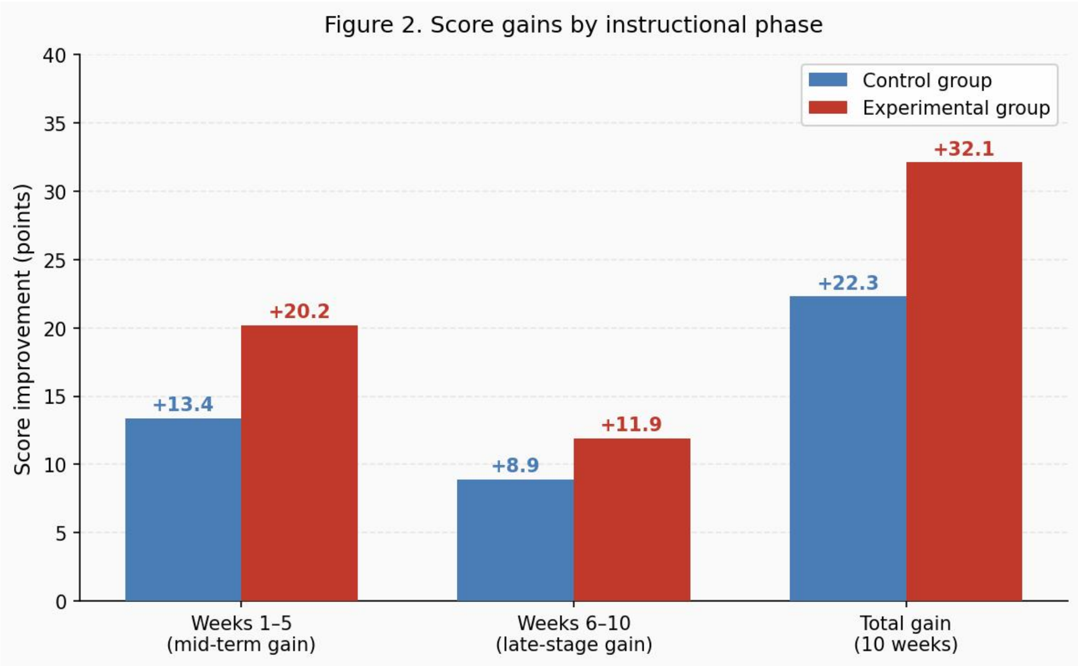

Figure 2. Score gains by instructional phase. Early gains (weeks 1–5) account for more than 60% of total improvement in both groups.

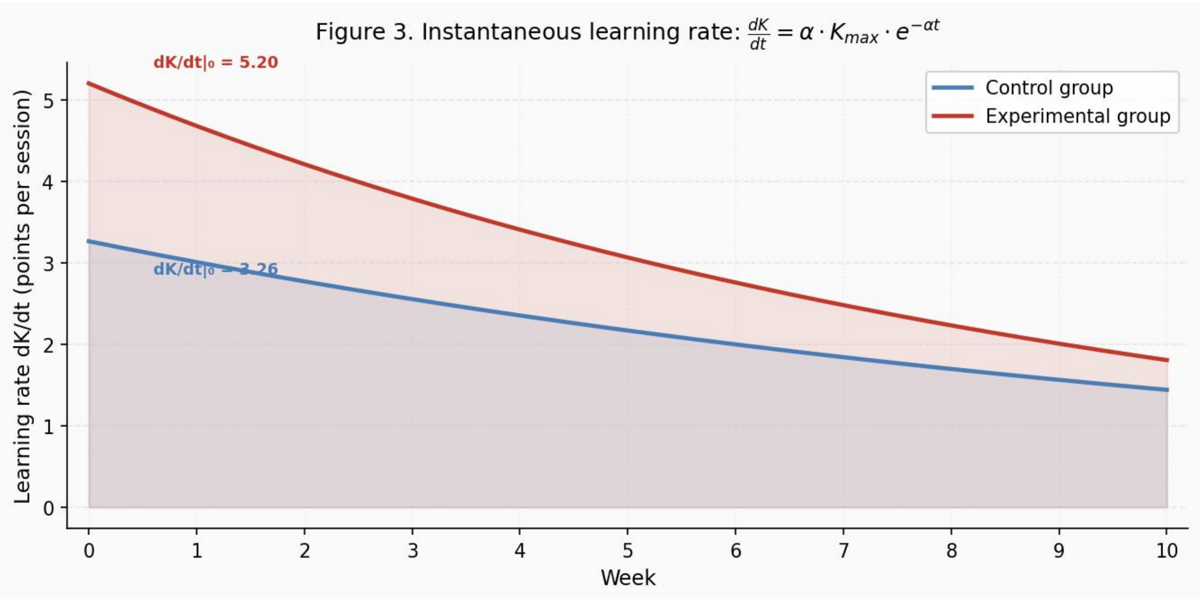

Figure 3. Instantaneous learning rate dK/dt over the course duration. The experimental group starts at a higher velocity (5.20 vs. 3.26 pts/session) and maintains an advantage throughout.

Discussion

The empirical trajectories matched the theoretical predictions of the model with high accuracy — not by coincidence, since the model was fitted to two of the three data points, but the analytical derivation itself reveals something meaningful: a single parameter α can compress the entire character of a group's learning into one number. The difference between 0.082 and 0.106 is, in that sense, the difference between two instructional philosophies.

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Why did the structured approach produce a higher α? The short answer is that it treated learning as a process to be managed, not a product to be delivered. Diagnostic assessment gave the instructor actionable information from day one. Guided problem-solving forced students to confront the structure of problems rather than pattern-match to memorized solutions. Feedback created tight loops between error and correction. And the progressive increase in task difficulty ensured that students were always working at the edge of their current competence.

These principles resonate with the theoretical frameworks of George Pólya and Alan Schoenfeld. Pólya argued that effective mathematical learning requires active engagement with problem-solving — that students must analyze, strategize, test, and reflect, not merely imitate. Schoenfeld extended this by demonstrating that metacognitive regulation is often what separates successful problem-solvers from unsuccessful ones. The structured program implemented here was, in effect, an attempt to build those capacities systematically — and the model gives us a quantitative trace of whether it worked.

The half-saturation analysis is particularly instructive. The experimental group reached the midpoint of its learning potential two weeks ahead of the control group. In a ten-week program, two weeks is not a marginal difference. It suggests that structured instruction does not merely improve final outcomes; it accelerates the entire trajectory, compressing the path to mastery.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The sample was small — sixty students in a single course — and the model has only two free parameters, which limits its flexibility. Future work should test the model with larger samples, incorporate individual-level fitting rather than group averages, and explore extensions that account for motivation, prior knowledge, and cognitive strategy as modulators of α.

Conclusion

This study set out to do two things: develop a mathematical model of knowledge accumulation during test preparation, and test that model against real instructional data. Both ambitions were realized. The model captures the general shape of learning trajectories observed in the experiment, and its analytically derived parameters — learning rate α, maximum gain K_{max}, initial velocity, half-saturation time — provide a richer description of instructional outcomes than final scores alone.

The structured instructional program produced substantially better outcomes: a total gain of 32.1 points versus 22.3, a learning rate 29% higher, and a half-saturation time two weeks shorter. These are not marginal improvements. They reflect a fundamental difference in how the two groups developed mathematical competence over ten weeks.

The broader implication is this: structure accelerates learning — not because it imposes discipline for its own sake, but because it aligns instruction with the actual mechanisms by which knowledge accumulates. Mathematical modeling makes those mechanisms visible. Rather than evaluating instruction only by where students end up, we can analyze how they get there — how quickly, along what trajectory, toward what ceiling.

Future research should pursue larger and more heterogeneous samples, incorporate motivational and cognitive variables into the model structure, and explore whether similar dynamics hold across different subject areas and examination types. The model proposed here is a starting point. But starting points, if they are well-chosen, tend to matter.

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