

الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية



The Ministry of Higher Education
and Scientific Research
University of Ahmed Zabana - Relizane

وزارة التعليم العالي و البحث العلمي
جامعة احمد زبانه غليزان
كلية الآداب و اللغات
قسم اللغة الانجليزية



**Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding in the EFL
Learning Context:**

An Exploratory Study of Third-Year Licence Students at Relizane
University

Academic Master's thesis

Speciality: Language and Communication

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Academic Year: 2025/2026

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Dedication

This humble work has been accomplished, first and foremost, thanks to Allah.

I dedicate it to my beloved parents, who have always been my support and strength in all circumstances.

*I also extend this dedication to my family for their continuous encouragement,
and to all those who, in one way or another, have contributed to my learning experience.*

Alhamdulillah

Meroua

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents for their endless love, sacrifices, and their support throughout my academic journey.

I am also deeply grateful to my family and friends for their constant encouragement, patience, and belief in me during both the challenging and successful moments. This achievement would not have been possible without their guidance and motivation.

Salima

Acknowledgements

Above all, we would like to express our gratitude to Allah for giving us the patience and strength to complete this work.

We would like to sincerely thank our supervisor Dr BOUGUENOUS Abdellah for his guidance and for answering all our questions and clarifications at any time.

We would extend our thanks to the members of the board of examiners: the president, Dr BOUDERBA Djamila, and the examiner, Dr BENADDA Abdelouahid, both from Ahmed Zabana University in Relizane.

Our special thanks go to all those who participated in this work, particularly the third-year Licence students at the Department of English, Ahmed Zabana University, as well as the teachers who did not hesitate to share their perspectives and contribute to the completion of the practical part of this study. May Allah bless them all.

Abstract

The current study aims to explore the extent to which memorization and critical understanding are balanced in the EFL context among third-year Licence students. It seeks to identify the factors influencing students' preference for either approach, examine their awareness of the importance of integrating both, and investigate the challenges they face when attempting to balance them in their learning process. To achieve these objectives and answer the research questions, a descriptive mixed-methods approach within a case study framework was adopted in order to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from students and their teachers. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 50 third-year Licence students and interviews conducted with 8 EFL teachers at the Department of English, Ahmed Zabana University in Relizane, Algeria. The findings indicate that exam requirements, time pressure, and students' language background influence their reliance on either memorization or critical understanding. Although students demonstrate a certain level of awareness of the importance of balancing both approaches, they still face several challenges that hinder their ability to do so in practice. Accordingly, it is recommended that students engage in activities that integrate both approaches, and that teachers develop learners' ability to understand rather than simply memorize, while assessing them through higher-order thinking tasks. In addition, curriculum designers are encouraged to support the integration of both memorization and critical understanding in learning and assessment practices.

Keywords: EFL learners, memorization, critical understanding, learning strategies.

Résumé

La présente étude vise à explorer dans quelle mesure la mémorisation et la compréhension critique sont équilibrées dans le contexte de l'EFL chez les étudiants de troisième année de licence. Elle cherche à identifier les facteurs influençant la préférence des étudiants pour l'une ou l'autre approche, à examiner leur degré de sensibilisation à l'importance de les intégrer, ainsi qu'à étudier les difficultés auxquelles ils sont confrontés lorsqu'ils tentent de les équilibrer dans leur processus d'apprentissage. Afin d'atteindre ces objectifs et de répondre aux questions de recherche, une approche descriptive à méthodes mixtes, inscrite dans un cadre d'étude de cas, a été adoptée afin de collecter des données quantitatives et qualitatives auprès des étudiants ainsi que de leurs enseignants. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire administré à 50 étudiants de troisième année de licence et d'entretiens menés avec 8 enseignants d'EFL au département d'anglais de l'Université Ahmed Zabana à Relizane, en Algérie. Les résultats indiquent que les exigences des examens, la pression du temps et le niveau linguistique des étudiants influencent leur recours à la mémorisation ou à la compréhension critique. Bien que les étudiants démontrent un certain niveau de sensibilisation à l'importance d'équilibrer les deux approches, ils font encore face à plusieurs difficultés qui entravent leur capacité à le faire en pratique. Par conséquent, il est recommandé que les étudiants s'engagent dans des activités qui intègrent les deux approches, et que les enseignants développent la capacité des apprenants à comprendre plutôt qu'à simplement mémoriser, tout en les évaluant à travers des tâches faisant appel à des compétences cognitives de haut niveau. En outre, il est recommandé aux concepteurs de programmes d'encourager l'intégration de la mémorisation et de la compréhension critique dans les pratiques d'apprentissage et d'évaluation.

Mots-clés : apprenants EFL, mémorisation, compréhension critique, stratégies d'apprentissage.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف مدى تحقيق التوازن بين الحفظ والفهم النقدي في سياق تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدى طلبة السنة الثالثة ليسانس. كما تسعى إلى تحديد العوامل التي تؤثر على تفضيل الطلبة لأحد النهجين، دراسة مستوى وعيهم بأهمية دمج كليهما، بالإضافة إلى استكشاف الصعوبات التي يواجهونها عند محاولة تحقيق هذا التوازن في مسار تعلمهم . لتحقيق هذه الأهداف والإجابة عن أسئلة البحث، تم اعتماد منهج وصفي قائم على الأساليب المختلطة ضمن إطار دراسة حالة، وذلك لجمع بيانات كمية ونوعية من الطلبة والأساتذة. وقد تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان وُرّع على 50 طالبًا من السنة الثالثة ليسانس، إضافة إلى إجراء مقابلات مع 8 أساتذة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على مستوى قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة أحمد زبانة ، غليزان، بالجزائر. أظهرت النتائج أن متطلبات الامتحانات، وضغط الوقت، والمستوى اللغوي للطلبة تؤثر على اعتمادهم على الحفظ أو الفهم النقدي. وعلى الرغم من أن الطلبة يُظهرون مستوى معينًا من الوعي بأهمية تحقيق التوازن بين النهجين، إلا أنهم لا زالوا يواجهون عدة صعوبات تعيق قدرتهم على تطبيق ذلك عمليًا. بناءً على ذلك، يُوصى بأن ينخرط الطلبة في أنشطة تدمج بين النهجين، وأن يعمل الأساتذة على تطوير قدرة المتعلمين على الفهم بدلاً من الاكتفاء بالحفظ، مع تقييمهم من خلال مهام تتطلب مهارات التفكير العليا. كما يُنصح مصممو المناهج بدعم دمج كل من الحفظ والفهم النقدي في ممارسات التعلم والتقييم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الحفظ، الفهم النقدي، استراتيجيات التعلم.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
L2	Second Language
LMD	Licence – Master – Doctorate
L3	Third-year Licence

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General Introduction

General Introduction

The most useful knowledge is not simply what one can remember, but rather how it can be applied in new situations. In education, work, or any other field, individuals need to make decisions and solve problems, not just recall what they have learned. This is why debates often present memorization and critical understanding as separate approaches. However, in education specifically, they are not enemies but complementary elements that can lead to better learning outcomes when effectively integrated.

In the EFL context, both memorization and critical understanding are necessary to facilitate students' language learning. Although learners may have different reasons for their preferences, both approaches should be connected in order to help them grasp information and know how to apply it in different situations.

At university level, EFL students follow a curriculum that combines various subjects requiring both memorization and critical understanding. Both play a notable role in the learning process; neither can deny the other, but they support each other.

Thus, this research aims to examine EFL students' awareness of the connection between memorization or critical understanding during the learning process. It also attempts to identify the factors influencing their preference for both approaches. In addition to another objective which is to investigate the barriers that hinder learners' progress in balancing the two approaches, namely identifying the difficulties they face when attempting to combine them in an effective way.

Moreover, the current study is significant as it examines two main learning approaches in the EFL context and sheds light on the importance of balancing them to achieve better learning outcomes. It may support students in raising their awareness of the necessity of integrating both methods. It may also assist teachers in better understanding learners' preferences and encourage them to create a learning environment that supports

knowledge acquisition through both approaches. Furthermore, it provides a deeper comprehension of memorization and critical understanding and opens the door for further research in this area.

Despite this significance, there is still a lack of research investigating the importance of balancing memorization and critical understanding, as well as the extent to which students are able to achieve this balance. Most previous studies have examined these two approaches separately, without highlighting the necessity of combining them in the EFL learning context.

EFL students often face a conflict in balancing memorization and critical understanding. While memorizing foundational information is needed, many students rely on it as their primary learning strategy. This creates a major problem in which learners are able to recall information yet often struggle to explain, analyze, or apply that knowledge creatively, which may limit their intellectual growth and overall language proficiency. As a result, this study raises the following questions:

1. To what extent are EFL learners aware of the connection between memorization and critical understanding during their learning process?
2. What are the main factors that influence EFL students' preference for memorization or critical understanding?
3. What challenges do EFL students encounter when attempting to balance these two learning strategies?

In an attempt to answer those questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. EFL learners have a certain level of awareness of the importance of connecting both approaches; however, in real practice, they may face particular challenges.
2. EFL students' preference for memorization or critical understanding is influenced by teaching methods, exam requirements, and language proficiency level.

3. EFL students struggle when attempting to balance both approaches due to lack of practice, exam pressure, time constraints, and limited language background.

To better understand all key elements, the present study is grounded in Constructivism Theory as well as Bloom's Taxonomy framework. These theories shed light on the importance of deep learning and active learner engagement. They emphasize that both approaches are not contradictory but complementary in the learning process.

To test the above mentioned hypotheses, this research adopts a descriptive mixed-methods approach within a case study framework. It was conducted at the Department of English at Ahmed Zabana University in Relizane, Algeria, where the target population consists of third-year Licence students.

The participants included both students and teachers. First, a representative sample of 50 third-year Licence students and a group of eight EFL teachers from the same department participated in interviews.

In order to collect the required data, two primary research instruments were used. Initially, a students' questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' perceptions of memorization and critical understanding. Furthermore, a structured interview was conducted with EFL teachers to obtain qualitative insights.

To carry out this case study research, the present work is purposefully divided into three interrelated chapters. Each chapter supports the other, starting from the literature review and leading to the findings that contribute to achieving the intended research objectives.

The first chapter is entitled Memorization and Critical Understanding in EFL Learning. It presents the literature review of the study. It defines the concepts of memorization and critical understanding, explores their roles in the EFL context, their benefits in language learning, their limitations, and discusses the importance of achieving a balance between them.

The second chapter is entitled Research Methodology and Study Context. It describes the practical aspects of the research, including the methodology, participants, setting, and procedures used for data collection and analysis.

The third chapter is entitled Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Recommendations. It provides the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews. It discusses the main findings and explains how they address the research questions and hypotheses. It also provides some pedagogical recommendations for both students and teachers. Finally, it concludes with suggestions for further researches in the same area.

Chapter One

Memorization and Critical Understanding in EFL Learning

1.1 Introduction

The first chapter of this work sheds light on two fundamental approaches to learning, particularly in the EFL context, namely memorization and critical understanding. It provides a range of definitions for both concepts while addressing memory and cognition as the underlying foundations of these processes. In addition, it highlights the role of each approach in language learning by outlining their respective benefits and limitations as well as the theoretical framework that draws this study. The latter section of the chapter focuses on the relationship between these two items, explaining the conditions under which memorization can serve as a support for critical understanding, as well as the situations in which it may hinder it. Moreover, it emphasizes the necessity of maintaining a balance between these two approaches to foster a deeper and more meaningful learning process.

1.2 Memorization in EFL Learning

Memorization is one of the long-established strategies adopted by many learners in the field of learning, including EFL. This strategy has generated wide debate among researchers; some have supported it and highlighted its benefits, while others have criticized it by pointing out its limitations. In light of these points, this section will address some aspects of memorization in educational contexts, particularly EFL, and will examine researchers' views on this subject.

1.2.1 Defining Memorization

In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), memorization is defined as “learning something carefully so that you can remember it exactly”. It is not just a superficial study of materials, but a deeper process requiring intense concentration to ensure that the brain can remember it accurately and completely when needed. Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) note, “memorization is the process of establishing information in memory. The term 'memorizing' usually refers to conscious processes” (p. 226). Here, they focus more on the

process of memorization as a stable retention of information in the memory, where it is done consciously. Similarly, Wenden & Rubin (1987) define memorization as “a strategy that focuses on the storage and retrieval of language. Though strategies such as drill and repetition might be considered the same as memorization strategies, the storage and retrieval processes are the focus of attention in the case of memorization” (p. 22). They view memorization as a strategy specifically applied in language learning, relying on storage, which means the process of inputting data into memory for consolidation, and retrieval, which refers to the process of being able to extract that stored information later. As Wenden and Rubin mentioned, methods such as drills and repetition can serve as strategies that support memorization.

In scientific terms, Wang (2009) explains, “memorization is a cognitive process of the brain at the meta-cognitive layer that establishes (encodes and retains) and reconstructs (retrieves and decodes) information in long-term memory” (pp. 81-82). In other words, memorizing is not merely an external activity but is linked to the brain’s internal cognitive processes. During memorization, the brain is fully aware of thinking, remembering, and other mental activities. He emphasizes long-term memorization, mentioning encoding and retention, meaning the translation of data into codes that the brain can first consolidate, retrieval, and decoding, which means the ability to recall and reuse that information when needed. This is what provides an accurate explanation of the mechanism of how memorization occurs.

1.2.2 Memory as the Foundation of Memorization

Before delving into the details of memorization, it is necessary to address the concept of memory, which is the foundation of the studied mechanism. As mentioned in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), The modern English word “memory” comes to us from the Middle English *memorie*, which in turn comes from the Anglo-French

memoire or *memorie*, and ultimately from the Latin *memoria* and *memor*, meaning “remembering”. Building on this historical understanding, Parkin (1993) states:

Memory is a framework or procedure that stores what we realize for some time later in our life. Our memory has three essential capacities: encoding, storing, and retrieving information. Memory represents a “biological process” incorporating a range of cognitive attributes. (p. 22)

Based on Parkin’s words, memory can be understood as a system or process that allows us to take in information, keep it for a period of time, and use it later in life. He further describes memory as having three main functions: encoding taking in information, storage keeping that information, and retrieval bringing it back when needed. Thus, memory is a biological process that supports many cognitive abilities, helping us learn, think, and make sense of our experiences. Likewise, Sternberg and Sternberg (2012) define memory as “the means by which we draw on our knowledge of the past to use this knowledge in the present” (p. 226). From this perspective, memory is not simply about storing information, but about retrieving and using past knowledge to guide current thinking, decision-making, learning, and behavior. As a result, through memory, people are able to recognize familiar situations, use learned skills, and adapt based on previous experiences. Extending this view to education, Arnold (1999) emphasizes, “memory is essential to all learning, and prominently so in second language learning” (p. 267). In practical terms, this means that people cannot learn a language if they cannot remember its components. Consequently, the brain has to work overtime to store new sounds, meanings, and patterns so that human beings can use the language later.

1.2.3 Memorization as a Learning Strategy in EFL

Memorization is a well-known learning strategy that is widely used among students, including learners of English as a foreign language. Thornbury (2002) emphasizes, “the

learner needs not only to learn a lot of words, but to remember them. In fact learning is remembering” (p. 23). This indicates, according to him, that learning is not only about acquiring a large amount of information, but also about the ability to retain it in memory, retrieve it, and use it appropriately when needed.

Along the same lines and from a simple scientific perspective, Mastin (2010) explains:

The relation of memory and learning is similar to a tidal wave. Neurons fire at first when learning to create files for the new information received in order to be memorized, but when remembering this information, neurons fire another time to retrieve this collected information from different stations of the brain and send it back as an output. Thus, memory depends on learning because learning makes us store and retrieve information, and learning depends on memory because without memorization, humans would never remember information and would never build civilizations. (p. 11)

Mastin clarifies that the relationship between learning and memory is a reciprocal one, meaning that each continuously depends on the other through the involvement of neurons. Some neurons are responsible for storing information during learning, while others become active to retrieve this information when needed so that it can be used for a specific purpose. He concludes that human progress would not be possible without reliance on memorization. Regarding EFL learning, Oanh (2006) agrees that memorization is an effective strategy for teaching English as a foreign language if it is used appropriately, as it enables learners to achieve the goal of real-life communication. Cohen and Oxford (2003) also argue that memorization is an excellent strategy used by students to improve their language proficiency, such as speaking and writing, for example. It has a direct impact on foreign language learning, extending to cognitive processes such as improving attention, retrieval ability, enhancing mental rehearsal, integration, and encoding language into symbols that are easier

to store. Therefore, memorization is not merely a superficial tool, but an effective strategy that supports learning a new language and developing its skills.

Overall, Sivell (1980) states, “the merits of using memorization by students which give them a feeling of accomplishment and success, security and familiarity, esthetic pleasure, and a body of knowledge. Rather than condemning the students' desire to memorize, Teachers need to approach it with understanding and appreciation. There are ways which can help the teacher to overcome the shortcomings which are claimed to accompany memorized language” (p. 52). Here, Sivell confirms that memorization, like other learning strategies, has positive aspects such as providing learners with a sense of comfort and reducing anxiety, especially when using a foreign language. It also helps build a reliable body of knowledge and makes the learning atmosphere more enjoyable. While, he criticizes teachers' rejection of this strategy and calls for dealing with it with understanding, given some students' preference for relying on memorization. He also points out that memorization, like other techniques, has certain drawbacks, but teachers have the ability to address and overcome them.

1.2.4 Techniques of Memorization in Language Learning

Memorizing is an active effort to enter information into the brain. According to Foer (2011), “the secret to a good memory is to take information that is lacking in meaning, context, and significance and transform it in some way so that it becomes meaningful in the light of all the other things that you have in your mind” (p. 91). In other words, brains remember things better when people connect them to something they already know. If a piece of information feels random or unimportant, it will be hard to remember it. However, if they give it meaning, link it to their experiences, or see how it fits with other knowledge they have, it becomes easier to store in their memory and recall later. In line with this principle, Agustiono and Rizal (2021) implemented a multi-sensory memorization technique to enhance

students' vocabulary acquisition. Specifically, the use of memorizing multi-senses technique is to improve students' vocabulary by engaging several senses at the same time. Students learn words through seeing, hearing, saying, and writing them, which helped increase their understanding and memory of vocabulary. Similarly, Bahri (2021) emphasized a word memorization approach using a handbook to enhance students' vocabulary at MAN 2 POSO. In this study, students were guided to memorize selected vocabulary lists from the handbook through repeated practice and review, helping them recognize, recall, and use new words more effectively. Overall, the results showed that this structured memorization approach made it easier for students to learn and retain vocabulary.

1.2.5 Benefits of Memorization in Language Learning

Memorization has long been regarded as an established approach in language learning, especially within the EFL context; accordingly, many researchers have discussed its benefits in supporting learners throughout their academic journey. Cook (1994) maintains, “repetition and learning by heart are valuable, pleasurable and efficient uses of language learning activities and can help language learners set valuable goals as they will be involved in the authentic and communicative use of language” (p. 133). Specifically, Cook (1994) argues that repeating language and learning it by heart are effective ways to learn a language. He believes these activities help learners remember language more easily and use it more confidently. By utilizing these methods, students can establish clear objectives and interact more effectively in real-life settings. Oanh (2006) states that as a way of internalizing what they have been taught, memorization is an ideal practice for English learners which leads to the natural production of the learned expressions. Building on this perspective, Oanh explains that memorization helps English learners truly absorb what they have been taught. In other words, memorizing words, phrases, or expressions, will make

language last longer. As a result, they can later use these expressions naturally and correctly in real communication.

Furthermore, as one of the participants in Stevick's study (cited in Ding, 2007) claims about memorization: "this was the most stupid method in the world but, towards the end of the semester, proved amazingly effective, even the staunchest opponents had to admit this" (p. 223). It means that although memorization initially seemed like a very ineffective learning method to the participant, their opinion changed over time. However, by the end of the semester, the results showed that memorization actually helped them learn successfully. Therefore, even students who strongly disliked memorization had to admit that it worked well and improved their learning.

1.2.6 Limitations of Memorization in Language Learning

Although many researchers have supported memorization and highlighted its benefits in language learning, especially in EFL contexts, others have criticized this strategy and discussed its limitations. These scholars argue that if memorization is not used appropriately, or if it is applied mechanically, it may hinder the learning process, limit the development of communicative competence, and prevent learners from expressing their creativity. Vassall-Fall (2008) criticizes memorization by presenting it as a learning approach based on mechanical repetition, regardless of attempts to understand or grasp meaning. He explains that students who rely on this strategy may be able to represent the information during exams, but they struggle to use and apply it effectively in real-life situations. Iran-Nejad (1995) claims, "memorization under the "drill and kill" approach results in learning that is externally controlled, list-like, easily forgotten, and not meaningfully connected to internal themes" (p. 25). Here, he does not criticize memorization in general, but rather focuses on a specific type, namely the "drill and kill" approach, which relies on memorization without understanding through mechanical repetition. He criticizes this approach for lacking self-awareness and

being based solely on external control, without linking learning to real practice. As a result, the information remains meaningless, poorly internalized, and easily forgotten. In addition, Oliver and Utermohlen (1995, as cited in Vassall-Fall, 2008) point out that the memorization strategy forces the learner to be passive, merely receiving information as it is, without attempting to analyze it, or actively engage with it. This is what makes excessive reliance on memorization a cause of weakening learners to think critically and limiting their creativity, as they merely accept information as it is without any further contribution. Ultimately, Gass and Selinker (2008) discuss, “second language learning is more than rule memorization and emphasize that it involves learning to express communicative needs” (p. 4). They shed light on the limitation of memorization, which lies in hindering the use of the L2 in the communicative process, since language learning is not limited to memorizing a set of grammatical rules, but rather to using them in real-life situations.

1.3 Critical Understanding in EFL Learning

In contemporary education, critical understanding occupies a central position in promoting active learner engagement in the learning process. This is particularly evident in the EFL learning, where language acquisition is not limited to recalling grammatical rules or achieving a surface-level linguistic understanding of meaning, but extends to interpretation, analysis, and the integration of students’ self-awareness into the learning process. Accordingly, this section aims to shed light on the relationship between critical understanding and the educational process, particularly within EFL contexts.

1.3.1 Defining Critical Understanding

From various general linguistic perspectives, critical understanding is viewed as a purposeful, in-depth, and evaluative analysis of information, aimed at applying it in real-life situations. Brookfield (2011) and Merry et al. (2007) discuss that criticality in learning is not limited to describing information or understanding it superficially, but rather involves the

ability to go beyond its literal meaning, interpret and analyze it, and relate it to different situational contexts. As a result, critical understanding represents an advanced form of critical learning, as it requires analyzing the background of information and integrating it within specific contexts in a more conscious manner rather than merely retaining it as it is. Anderson (2001) defines critical understanding as “constructing meaning from oral, written and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining” (p. 23). In other words, critical understanding is not limited to merely grasping the meaning of a form of information after hearing or reading it, but rather involves several processes such as interpretation, explanation, exemplification, inference, and others. Here, Anderson emphasizes that critical understanding goes beyond multiple dimensions and includes various mental processes; the learner does not simply comprehend information and stop there, but actively engages with it.

In the same context, Montalvo and Torres (2004) argue that critical understanding is not limited to merely reading information, but rather involves engaging with it in a deliberate and planned manner as a strategy to achieve an understanding beyond surface meaning. In other words, the learner does not settle for superficial learning aimed at pleasing the teacher, but instead engages in conscious learning that involves understanding, planning, explanation, interpretation, and inference. This makes the student an active participant in the learning and knowledge acquisition process, rather than a passive recipient of information. As Gray (1960, cited in Alderson, 2000) describes, this type of comprehension is referred to metaphorically as understanding “what lies behind the lines.” That is to say, comprehension here is not limited to the literal meaning, but extends to what lies beneath the lines, which can only be achieved through critical thinking, analysis, questioning, and inferring implicit messages, as well as connecting information to reach deep rather than superficial understanding. Seen through this lens, Entwistle’s (2000) study on deep learning also allows the concept of critical

understanding to be inferred as a process of analyzing information, understanding its details, and being able to apply it, rather than merely reproducing it as it is. Entwistle distinguishes between types of learning, noting that there is surface learning, which relies on memorizing information solely for exams without developing a genuine understanding, and deep learning, in which the student attempts to infer the meaning behind the information, understand it, analyze it, and apply it in various contexts.

1.3.2 Cognition as the Foundation of Critical Understanding

As memorization relies on memory, critical understanding is deeply connected to cognition, which forms its fundamental basis. Building on *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (1988), “cognition is derived from the Latin root *cognoscere* to become acquainted with know”. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (1988), also defines this term as “the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association and also as the sum of what is known”. This definition links cognition closely to knowledge, which is acquired, processed, and refined through various experiences. The knowledge gained is not merely superficial but is shaped by these experiences, which cognition uses to interpret and respond to different situations. Similarly, in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), cognition is viewed as “the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and the senses”. This suggests that cognition encompasses all mental processes involved in learning and can be understood through three primary channels. First is thought, which is reflected in analysis, interpretation, and inference. Second is experience, meaning that continuous practice and experimentation are essential elements in learning. Third are the senses, which serve as the primary channels through which information in its various forms is transmitted. Thus, cognition serves as the essential foundation for critical understanding and other cognitive activities.

1.3.3 Critical Understanding and Language Learning

Critical understanding is the ability to move beyond basic comprehension of information and engage with it analytically and reflectively. It involves interpreting meanings, examining underlying assumptions, evaluating evidence, and making connections between ideas rather than accepting information at face value or simply memorizing it. Specifically, critical understanding in language learning refers to learners' ability to go beyond surface-level comprehension and actively interpret, analyze, and evaluate the meanings in texts. It emphasizes on learners' engagement with language as a tool for reflection and social awareness rather than merely repetition or memorization. In the EFL context, this means that students do not simply memorize vocabulary and grammatical structures but use them to construct meaning, express personal viewpoints, and respond thoughtfully to authentic communicative situations. When learners develop critical understanding, they become more autonomous, motivated, and capable of transferring language knowledge to new contexts. Therefore, critical understanding supports deeper learning and helps balance the traditional reliance on memorization with meaningful, reflective language use.

1.3.4 Benefits of Critical Understanding in Language Learning

Critical understanding has become essential in how language learning students engage with their courses. Instead of merely memorizing facts, learners who focus on understanding develop deeper insights into the subject matter, which enhances both their learning process and academic performance. Several researchers highlight the benefits of this approach, emphasizing the transformative impact it has on students' learning strategies and motivation. Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) argue, "students focused on understanding act as 'transformative meaning seekers'" (p. 73). Such learners apply deep analytical methods across all aspects of their studies, including coursework and exams. In other words, they go beyond just memorizing facts, they engage deeply with the content, using analytical thinking

to connect ideas and gain a thorough understanding. This approach is reflected in their entire academic experience, where they apply these deep-thinking methods to make sense of and internalize what they are learning. Supporting this perspective, Vermunt (1998) established that students who view learning as a process of building knowledge tend to utilize self-regulated and deep-level study strategies. More specifically, students who believe learning is about actively creating and understanding knowledge tend to use more effective study strategies, such as self-regulation and deep learning techniques. As a result, these students are more engaged in their learning and focus on understanding the material in depth rather than just memorizing it. This aligns with Biggs (1999) who view that students with strong understanding skills are motivated by the inherent meaning of their assignments. These learners reflect on how tasks relate to reality, using cause-and-effect logic to formulate unique theories and hypotheses. For instance, EFL students who have a strong understanding of their subjects are motivated by the deeper meaning behind their assignments. Essentially, they think critically about how tasks connect to real-life situations and use logical reasoning to develop their own ideas, theories, and hypotheses.

1.3.5 Obstacles to Developing Critical Understanding

The process of critical understanding is not a simple one that students can easily master. Rather, learners face several obstacles that hinder the development of this mental activity and limit their ability to benefit from its advantages.

One of the major barriers to improving the level of critical understanding is the long-standing reliance on memorization as a learning strategy. Biggs (1999) highlights, "Some teachers rely to a big extent on understanding, neglecting the early methods of memorization." (p. 109). In this regard, Biggs explains that some teachers focus directly on critical understanding without taking into account students' prior dependence on memorization throughout their educational journey. This sudden shift may prevent students

from successfully moving from a memorization-based learning style to one that is based on understanding. Thus, learners struggle to improve their critical understanding because these cognitive skills were not acquired gradually, but were instead imposed abruptly in place of the familiar memorization approach. In addition, the nature of the educational system, which encourages students to prioritize grades over the acquisition and practical application of knowledge, further complicates the issue. Consequently, students tend to search for the correct answer to recall during examinations, without making the effort to truly understand or reflect on it; they simply reproduce information as it is. Other learners, due to fear of making mistakes, avoid engaging their self-awareness in shaping acquired knowledge, and instead rely on rote reproduction.

In the EFL context, some students face additional difficulties in learning English due to their weak background knowledge. As is widely known, critical understanding requires a rich background that allows learners to analyze, interpret, and apply their own awareness to information. Therefore, many students opt for a surface-level, literal understanding of meaning rather than engaging in critical understanding.

1.4 Constructivism and Bloom's Taxonomy in EFL Learning

Understanding how knowledge is acquired in language learning, whether through memorization, critical understanding, or other approaches, relies on the consideration of a set of theories. Constructivism and Bloom's Taxonomy are among the most influential frameworks that provide valuable insights into the educational process.

1.4.1 Constructivism as a Learning Theory

It is generally accepted that constructivism is a theory that encourages learners, including EFL learners, to construct their own knowledge through experience and to apply it in different contexts rather than simply recalling it. Jordan et al. (2008) explain that constructivism does not focus on the information itself, but on what learners can do with it, as

it allows them to actively build their knowledge by linking what they have learned with new data. Constructivism also provides learners with the opportunity to rely on themselves in thinking, understanding, discussing, and analyzing until they construct their own knowledge rather than copying it from external sources (Kanselaar, De Jong, Andriessen, & Goodyear, 2000).

This theory strongly supports EFL learners in not relying solely on memorization or merely storing information as it is. Instead, they are encouraged to integrate their skills through explaining, analyzing, interpreting, and critically understanding each aspect. Learners are expected to be active participants who are able to use constructed understanding in new situations rather than simply reproducing it.

1.4.2 Bloom's Taxonomy as a Learning Framework

Bloom's Taxonomy is a hierarchical framework that organizes the learning process into a progression of interconnected skills, consisting of six cognitive levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. It provides teachers with a structured approach to gradually promote deeper learning. (Nurmatova & Atlun, 2023) Bloom emphasizes the need to move from surface learning to deep learning through a series of levels. The first level is remembering; he does not underestimate the value of memorization, but rather considers it an initial stage for acquiring facts, followed by the level of understanding as the beginning of moving beyond memorization, where the learner starts to leave their own mark in constructing knowledge, leading to the remaining higher levels.

In the EFL context, Bloom's Taxonomy can be seen as a guiding framework that helps learners become aware of their level of learning and gradually progress to higher levels. It also sheds light for teachers, enabling them to make the learning process a pathway for enhancing and developing learners' skills, rather than keeping them at the lower level of the taxonomy.

1.5 Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

Memorization and critical understanding are two essential approaches in EFL context. The first one allows students learn vocabulary, grammar rules, and useful expressions. However, relying only on it may limit students' ability to use English creatively. On the other hand, critical understanding enables learners to analyze, express ideas, and apply language in new situations. Therefore, this section highlights when they complement or hinder one another, while emphasizing the importance of balancing them in the learning process.

1.5.1 Relationship between Memorization and Critical Understanding

In the EFL context, memorization and critical understanding are closely interconnected processes that contribute to effective language acquisition. Memorization plays a foundational role, as learners must retain vocabulary, grammatical structures, formulaic expressions, and discourse patterns in order to develop linguistic competence. This stored knowledge provides the cognitive resources necessary for comprehension and production. However, memorization alone does not ensure meaningful language use or communicative competence.

Critical understanding extends beyond the recall of linguistic forms to involve analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and the application of knowledge in new contexts. It enables learners to interpret texts, construct arguments, express personal perspectives, and engage with language in a purposeful manner. When students critically engage with content by questioning assumptions, comparing viewpoints, or synthesizing information, they transform memorized input into flexible and functional knowledge. Thus, memorization provides the structural foundation of language, while critical understanding activates and deepens that knowledge through meaningful use. Noice and Noice (1993, 1996) state that people do not rely on rote memorization alone; rather, they engage in semantic analysis and actively process the script, with accurate verbatim recall emerging from a deep understanding

of the text. In other words, people do not memorize their lines through simple repetition. Instead, they first carefully analyze and understand the meaning of the script, including the characters' intentions, emotions, and the context of each line. This deep understanding helps them remember the exact words more effectively where accurate memorization follows meaningful comprehension, showing that understanding the text supports and strengthens memory. In this way, memorization and critical understanding are not opposing approaches but complementary dimensions of language learning, working together to foster both linguistic accuracy and critical literacy.

1.5.2 Memorization as a Support to Critical Understanding

The role of memorization in learning cannot be disregarded, as in certain cases it serves as a fundamental support for the process of critical understanding. Jensen (2005) highlights the importance of attention in memorization, arguing that deep learning cannot be achieved without allocating sufficient focus to each learning item. Through such focused attention, learners are able to receive information accurately and store it more securely. Consequently, memorization does not function merely as a mechanical process that leads to rapid forgetting. Rather, it prepares learners for deeper understanding, enabling them to acquire knowledge consciously and become capable of processing and comprehending information more effectively.

Furthermore, Ruph (2007) argues that the difficulties most students face in achieving deep learning are not caused by memorization itself, but rather by a lack of awareness of effective memorization strategies. Many learners tend to store information mechanically without identifying what is essential, which reduces memorization to a superficial and weak practice for knowledge retention. Ruph (2007) further emphasizes that when learners connect what they memorize to real-life situations and personal experiences, memorization can

function as a preparatory stage for critical understanding, thereby enhancing deep comprehension.

In a related perspective, Matlin (2003) states that memorization supports critical understanding when the student first tries to grasp the meaning of the information before memorizing it, looking beyond its surface features, then linking it to personal experience and applying it in real-life situations, which enhances its retention in memory. These principles transform traditional rote memorization into a method that facilitates the path to critical understanding and contributes to achieving genuine learning rather than just a superficial one, which prevents the students from incorporating their self-awareness into knowledge acquisition.

1.5.3 Memorization as a Barrier to Critical Understanding

Both memorization and critical understanding are supportive strategies in the learning process. At times, they can complement each other, while in other cases they may not. For instance, memorization can, in certain situations, become a barrier to students' critical understanding. Excessive and habitual reliance on it is considered one of the most common obstacles that obstruct the development of critical understanding during learning, as Edwards (2007) argues that mechanical memorization does not support critical understanding, as it hinders students' ability to generate new ideas and develop creativity. This is because it trains learners to receive information, store it, and reproduce it as it is, without analysis, interpretation, or deep comprehension. In this regard, his position clearly opposes rote memorization, considering it incompatible with genuine learning. True learning, according to this view, requires the learner's active involvement and personal input in analysing issues, discussing them, evaluating information, and processing it consciously, so that the learner becomes an effective participant in the learning process rather than a passive recipient of information. In the same context, Broers and Imbos (2005), as reported by Hulsizer and

Woolf (2009), adopt a critical stance toward memorization because it does not support learners in developing deep understanding, analysis, explanation, interpretation, and other cognitive activities. Memorization that relies on storing data as they are constrains students' creativity in processing information and applying it in new situations or problem-solving contexts.

1.5.4 Importance of Balancing Memorization and Critical understanding in EFL Learning

Effective language learning strategies highlight the need to combine different cognitive approaches in EFL classrooms. Among these approaches, memorization and critical understanding are often viewed as contrasting yet complementary processes that both contribute significantly to learners' academic success. Establishing a balance between them has become increasingly important, where students are expected to demonstrate both linguistic competence and analytical skills. Memorization plays a fundamental role in helping learners acquire vocabulary, grammar rules, sentence structures, and fixed expressions that form the basis of language accuracy and fluency. Without a solid linguistic foundation, students may struggle to express themselves clearly, construct accurate sentences, or participate effectively in academic discussions. However, language learning is not limited to recalling information. Critical understanding enables students to analyze texts deeply, interpret meanings, evaluate arguments, and express personal opinions in a logical way. It promotes active engagement with content and encourages independent thinking. Relying solely on memorization may lead to mechanical learning and limited communicative competence, while focusing only on critical understanding without sufficient linguistic knowledge may result in weak accuracy and unclear expression. Therefore, integrating memorization with critical understanding ensures that learners develop both strong foundational knowledge and higher-order thinking skills, leading to more meaningful, effective, and autonomous use of the English language.

1.6 Conclusion

Memorization and critical understanding play a clear role in the process of EFL learning. As demonstrated in this chapter, memorization does not achieve effectiveness or positive learning outcomes unless it is combined with critical understanding, which contributes to enhancing learning and developing linguistic competence. Achieving a balance between these two approaches is essential in order to enable students to attain satisfactory learning outcomes, improve academic performance, and move beyond the role of a passive learner who merely receives information without processing or applying it.

Chapter Two

Research Methodology and Study Context

2.1 Introduction

The second chapter presents the research methodology adopted to investigate the balance between memorization and critical understanding in the EFL learning context among third-year Licence students at Ahmed Zabana University (Relizane). It provides an account of the research design, participants, data collection instruments, and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. The chapter aims to explain the methodological choices made in conducting this study and their relevance to the research objectives and questions. It begins with an overview of the research design and type of research adopted, followed by a description of the population, sampling, and the instruments used for data collection, namely the students' questionnaire and teachers' interviews. The procedures for data collection and analysis are also presented. Furthermore, the chapter introduces the learning situation, including the research context and the profile of the targeted population, and concludes with the ethical considerations that guided the conduct of the study.

2.2 Research Methodology

Besides the literature review, the methodological framework plays a notable role in structuring the study and achieving the intended research objectives, as well as in reaching the findings and ensuring reliable results and valid conclusions.

2.2.1 Research Design

A good research design guides the researcher on how to conduct the study, reach the desired results, and achieve the research objectives. Creswell (2014) states, "Research design is the overall strategy that you choose to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way" (p. 3). This means that it makes the investigation process more professional and credible, and also facilitates the collection, organization, and analysis of data within a systematic method. In order to gather diverse data that allow the study to achieve its intended results, this research adopted a descriptive mixed-methods approach within a case

study framework focusing on third-year Licence EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to these students, as well as interviews conducted with EFL teachers. This design was aligned with the study's objectives and enabled answering the research questions.

2.2.2 Type of Research

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) highlight that mixed methods research is an approach that involves the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The current research adopts a descriptive mixed-methods approach within a case study framework. It aims to explore the factors that lead students to rely on memorization, critical understanding, or a combination of both. This is achieved through the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from students via a questionnaire, as well as qualitative data from teachers through interviews.

2.2.3 Justification of the Research Design

The suitability of this research design for the present study is justified by its alignment with the research questions and its ability to achieve the intended results. A descriptive approach was selected because this study aims to present and describe the factors that lead students to rely on certain learning approaches, particularly in the study of English as a Foreign Language, with specific focus on memorization and critical understanding, and on whether students are able to balance between them or whether achieving such balance remains difficult for them.

Moreover, a mixed-methods approach was adopted in order to obtain diverse data: quantitative data to identify the number and percentages of students who support or oppose the two approaches, and qualitative data to go deeper, as numerical data alone are not sufficient to reveal the reasons and factors behind these preferences. This also allows for the analysis of the difficulties students face and the proposal of relevant recommendations.

Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to EFL students, which included both close-ended and open-ended questions, as well as interviews conducted with EFL teachers in order to gather qualitative data and perspectives that clarify specific aspects of the research. Furthermore, this study can be considered a case study because third-year Licence EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University were specifically selected to complete the questionnaire, and their views and perceptions were relied upon to contribute to the findings of the study.

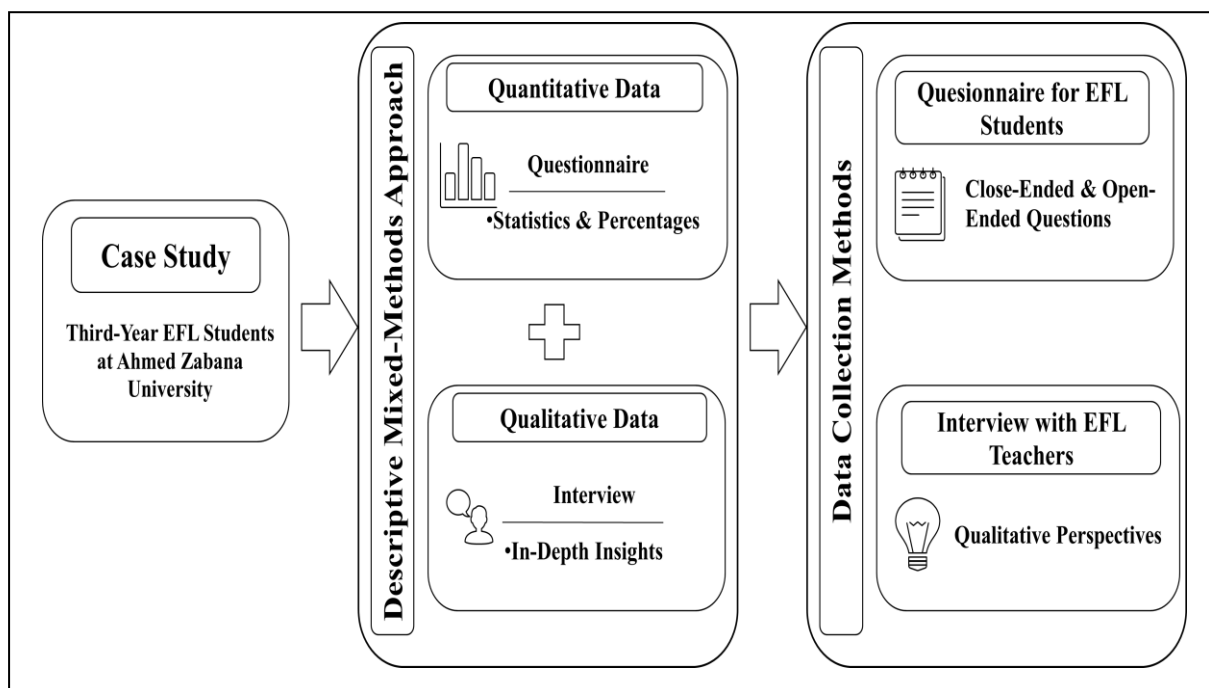


Fig 2.1: Research Design Overview

2.2.4 Population and Sampling

Population and sampling are essential components of any scientific research, as they play a crucial role in obtaining valid results. This section describes the target population of the study and the sampling technique used to select the participants.

2.2.4.1 Target Population

In the present study, the target population consists of third-year Licence students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Ahmad Zabana University, comprising a total of 153

students divided into four groups. This population has been selected because they possess sufficient experience in learning English, having studied the language for several years. Such experience enables them to reflect more effectively on their learning processes, particularly with regard to memorization strategies and critical understanding. Moreover, third-year students are at an advanced stage of their academic development, where they are expected to move beyond rote memorization and engage in higher critical understanding skills such as analysis, evaluation, and independent learning. Therefore, focusing on this population allows for deeper insights into how learners balance memorization with meaningful understanding in the EFL context.

2.2.4.2 Sampling Description

Sampling is an essential step in research design, as it allows the researcher to collect data efficiently while still making generalizations about the entire population. A well-chosen sample increases the validity and reliability of the findings.

In this study, a sample of 50 students was randomly selected from the total population of third-year EFL students. Random sampling was adopted to ensure that each member of the population had an equal chance of being included in the study, thereby reducing potential bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample. This method is particularly appropriate for the current exploratory research, as it promotes objectivity and allows for a more accurate reflection of students' perspectives. The selected sample size of 50 students is considered sufficient to collect meaningful data and identify general patterns related to the use of memorization and critical understanding strategies in language learning.

2.2.5 Research Instruments Description

In any type of research, ensuring the selection of appropriate data collection instruments guarantees obtaining accurate results that serve the objectives of the study. To investigate the balance between memorization and critical understanding among third-year

EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University, two research instruments were used: a structured questionnaire for students and a structured interview for teachers.

2.2.5.1 Students' Structured Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data about students' learning practices and attitudes toward memorization and critical understanding. It included 30 items grouped into five sections.

A) Section One: Background Information

The first section consists of five questions which aim to gather demographic and academic data. In the first question, students were asked to determine their gender by ticking the appropriate option, either male or female. The second was an open-ended question regarding their age, where they were required to provide it directly. Subsequently, they were asked about their stream in secondary school by selecting one of the following options: literary, scientific, or technical. The fourth one focused on the duration of studying English, where learners were asked to select one of these options: less than 4 years, 4–7 years, 7–10 years, or more than 10 years. The section was concluded with a closed-ended question asking whether students study English outside the university context or not.

B) Section Two: Memorization Practices

The second section consists of seven items, ranging from item 6 to item 12, where students choose between "Never," "Sometimes," or "Always." It explores the reasons behind rote learning, such as fear of misunderstanding, ease of use, or exam requirements. Item 6 focused on students' reliance on memorization as the easiest learning strategy. The next item addressed the fear of misunderstanding lectures. Then, students were asked whether they rely on memorization because they struggle to understand complex lectures. In the ninth item, students were required to indicate whether they memorize to avoid spending too much time engaging in critical understanding. Additionally, they were asked whether they memorize the

lecture exactly as it is, even when they do not fully understand its content. Another one examined whether, when students take notes from the teacher's explanation, they memorize them without applying any critical understanding. The last item in this section focused on students' reliance on memorization due to the type of exam questions, particularly when they perceive that most of them require recalling and reproducing information exactly as presented in the lectures.

C) Section Three: Critical Understanding Practices

The third section also consists of eight items, ranging from item 13 to item 20, where students are required to choose between "Disagree," "Neutral," or "Agree." These questions assess students' confidence in deep learning, their ability to paraphrase, and their preference for critical understanding over simple recall. In the first item of this section, students were asked to rate their confidence when they understand the lecture deeply without relying on memorization. Then, they were asked about their preference for understanding the lecture and explaining it in their own words. The following item focused on the effectiveness of critical understanding in helping learners generate new ideas and whether they perceive it as the best way to achieve good marks. Additionally, students were requested to assess their reliance on the teacher's explanation rather than memorizing every single word. Item 18 addressed learners' ability to understand the lecture critically and reformulate it in their own style by using new examples. The next one examined their choice of critical understanding even when they perceive that the exam focuses on memorization. Finally, in the present section, students were instructed to rate the effectiveness of critical understanding in performing well in exams.

D) Section Four: Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

This fourth section consists of eight items as well, ranging from item 21 to item 28, using the "Never," "Sometimes," and "Always" scale. It investigates how students integrate

both memorization and critical understanding, their awareness of when to switch between them, and how exam pressure affects this balance. Initially, students were required to rate their awareness of when to use those two approaches. Then, they were asked whether they are effective for learning English. Furthermore, learners were asked whether they follow the method of understanding the lecture first to make it easier to memorize the information, and whether they do the opposite. Additionally, students were required to indicate whether memorization supports critical understanding when answering in exams. In the following item, learners were asked to indicate their level of agreement regarding whether balancing memorization and critical understanding helps them perform well in both classroom activities and exams, and whether developing both of these skills enables them to answer indirect questions, even when they are not clearly explained in the lecture. This section concludes by determining whether exam questions and time pressure create barriers to applying critical understanding.

E) Section Five: Difficulties and Strategies in Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

The last section of the questionnaire consists of two open-ended questions in which students were given the freedom to provide qualitative and descriptive responses regarding the difficulties they face when trying to balance memorization and critical understanding, as well as the strategies they use to improve this ability.

2.2.5.2 Teachers' Structured Interview

The structured interview aimed to collect qualitative data about teachers' views on memorization, critical thinking, and their teaching methods. It consists of six questions:

- The initial questions establish the participants' professional credibility by inquiring about their academic qualifications and years of experience teaching at the university level.

- Questions 2 and 3 include the teachers' insights into student behavior, specifically asking why they think students rely on memorization over critical understanding.
- Questions 4 and 5 examine the teachers' active role in the classroom, focusing on methods used during lectures to encourage deeper understanding and the nature of exam questions and whether they are designed to test memorization or critical understanding.
- The final question is about teacher's recommendation to help students achieve a better balance between memorization and critical understanding.

All teachers were asked the same predetermined questions to ensure consistency. The interviews were conducted with EFL teachers, and their responses were treated confidentially.

2.2.6 Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned previously, the data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to third-year Licence students and a structured interview conducted with teachers at Ahmed Zabana University.

On the one hand, the questionnaire was distributed in the classroom to students from different groups selected randomly, with a total of 50 participants, who were given sufficient time to complete it and asked to answer carefully and honestly, without any obligation or pressure to respond. They were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially, anonymously, and used solely for research purposes. The participants were also guaranteed that the researcher has no right to reveal their personal data or judge their responses, and that they are completely free to choose their answers comfortably.

On the other hand, the interview was conducted with 8 teachers in order to obtain accurate and in-depth insights into the research topic. Participants were given the full freedom to accept or refuse the interview invitation. They were also assured that their

responses would remain confidential, anonymous and would be used only for the purpose of this study, without requesting any personal information.

2.2.7 Data Analysis Procedures

After the process of collecting data using different instruments, their analysis represents a crucial step that guides the researcher toward obtaining reliable results that help validate the hypotheses, answer the research questions, and achieve the intended objectives.

In the current study, the data obtained from the students' questionnaire are analyzed descriptively using percentages. The results are then presented in the form of tables and figures, such as pie charts and bar charts of various types, followed by an interpretation in each question in order to highlight the key findings.

As for the second data collection instrument, which is the structured interview, the responses provided by teachers are analyzed descriptively with an appropriate interpretation. This allows for the confirmation of the questionnaire results and helped in obtaining detailed and accurate insights into the research topic.

2.3 Learning Situation

Learning situation forms the basis of teaching and learning processes. It reflects the overall environment, including teaching methods, classroom interaction, and the conditions that influence students' performance and learning outcomes.

2.3.1 Research Context

The current study took place at Ahmed Zabana University, specifically within the Faculty of Letters and Languages, in the Department of English. It involved third-year Licence students as the target population, with a sample of fifty students selected to complete the questionnaire, as well as EFL teachers from the same department who participated in the interview. The learning environment in this department is characterized by the use of various teaching methods that focus on both memorization and critical understanding, across different

types of modules, including both theoretical and practical ones. This context provides an appropriate setting to explore EFL students' preferred learning strategies, as well as their awareness of the importance of balancing memorization and critical understanding in their learning process, and whether they attempt to achieve this balance.

2.3.2 Research Setting

As mentioned previously, the present study was conducted at Ahmed Zabana University, located in the Wilaya of Relizane, Algeria. It is named after the hero of the Algerian Revolution who is the martyr "Ahmed Zabana". It includes various faculties that allow students to pursue different academic specializations. Among them, there is the Faculty of Letters and Languages which aims to the study of languages, literature, and cultural studies. It offers various programs including English, French, and Arabic studies, aiming to develop students' learning skills.

The faculty follows the LMD system "Licence _ Master _ Doctorate" which is designed to promote both theoretical knowledge and practical competencies. It provides a structured curriculum that combines language mastery with critical understanding, research skills, and academic writing. Students are exposed to a variety of modules such as linguistics, literature, civilization, and didactics, which require the use of memorization and critical understanding together. In addition, the faculty is supported by qualified academic staff with diverse teaching experience, who contribute to creating an interactive learning environment. Teaching methods vary between lectures, tutorials, and research based activities, encouraging students to move beyond rote learning toward deeper comprehension and analysis. This academic setting makes the faculty an appropriate area for investigating the balance between memorization and critical understanding in EFL learning.

2.3.3 Profile of Third-Year Licence EFL Students

Third-year EFL students are generally considered to have an intermediate level of English proficiency, as they have studied the language for three years at university, in addition to their prior exposure to it during both middle and secondary schools. Therefore, it can be assumed that they have sufficient experience and a solid background in learning English, including their ability to understand, comprehend, analyze, memorize, and apply various learning methods. As they are approaching graduation and the transition from the Licence degree either to Master's studies or to professional life outside the academic context, these students represent an important group for the present research due to their familiarity and experience with both memorization and critical understanding in their learning process.

2.3.4 Profile of the Participating Teachers

The participating teachers are academic professionals within the department of English, hold diverse qualifications, which provide them with a comprehensive perspective and extensive experience in balancing memorization and critical understanding. Their experience at the university level gives them a deep understanding of students' learning behaviors and preferences.

Interviews were conducted with eight teachers, as they are responsible for designing lectures and exam questions that directly influence students' reliance on memorization or deep understanding. Their academic profiles reflect their qualifications and expertise, as they provide students with the necessary foundations for lectures and encourage them to engage in advanced critical understanding, making them key guides in developing students' learning skills.

Those teachers hold various academic degrees, including PhD, Master, and Magister. They teach different modules such as ESP, methodology, linguistics, and didactics, as well as other courses that require both memorization and critical understanding approaches.

2.3.5 Overview of the Third-Year EFL Curriculum

The third-year Licence program at Ahmed Zabana University consists of various modules that require different cognitive skills. These modules are categorized into three main units.

2.3.5.1 Fundamental Modules

Fundamental modules are the most important subjects in the English department. They require students to move beyond memorizing information toward higher level of deep understanding especially when they pass their exams.

- ❖ **Linguistics:** It is the scientific study of language structure and use. This module allows students not just define a rule, but to apply it to a new sentence and modify it with their own words.
- ❖ **Didactics:** It is the study of teaching theories and classroom practices. Learners memorize the rules of teaching but use critical comprehension to reformulate those rules into a practical lesson plan.
- ❖ **English for Specific Purposes (ESP):** It is about learning how to teach English for professional fields like medicine or tourism. EFL learners have to memorize specific academic terms and analyze professional needs.
- ❖ **Literature:** It is the analysis and interpretation of English literary texts. Here, students must have deep understanding to analyze literary themes.
- ❖ **Civilization:** It is the study of the history and culture of English speaking countries. Students critically using facts and link them into a coherent essays.

2.3.5.2 Methodological Modules

Methodological modules provide the practical tools students need for their academic work.

- ❖ **Research Methodology:** It is about training on how to design a scientific research and write a thesis. This requires students a high degree of balance,

memorizing specific vocabulary while critically applying rules to design a research .

- ❖ **Written Expression:** This module focuses on advanced writing skills and essay structure. Students move beyond recall to paraphrase new ideas and use their own terms.
- ❖ **Oral Expression:** It is one of the productive skills that allows students to express their ideas clearly , depending on their own vocabulary using their unique styles
- ❖ **Translation:** Practicing the transfer of meaning between English, Arabic, and French. It leads learners to be able to used memorized vocabulary as a foundation while using critical understanding to ensure the coherence and accuracy of the final translated text.

2.3.5.3 Discovery Modules

These subjects broaden the students' knowledge and prepare them for future jobs.

- ❖ **Cognitive Psychology:** It is about understanding how the human mind learns and remembers information. This module focuses on deep learning as it challenges students to critically evaluate how they learn, often creating a conflict between memorizing definitions and understanding cognitive processes.
- ❖ **Enterprenariat:** This module prepares students for the professional job market. It demands higher critical understanding skills as students cannot simply recall technical rules of job market, they must critically modify their ideas to adapt to specific business contexts.

Table 2.1

Overview of Third Year Modules

Module Type	Number	Module Name
Fundamental Modules	5	✓ Linguistics ✓ Didactics ✓ ESP ✓ Literature ✓ Civilization
Methodological Modules	4	✓ Research Methodology ✓ Written Expression ✓ Oral Expression ✓ Translation
Discovery Modules	2	✓ Cognitive Psychology ✓ Enterprenariat

2.4 Ethical Standards

Ethical principles are the fundamental pillar in any research study that ensures the integrity of results and the protection of participants. They are not only formal procedures, but a necessity to guarantee the quality and continuity of the research.

2.4.1 *Protection of Participants*

Ethical principles ensure the safety of individuals involved in the research. Participants must be informed about the aims of the study, all provided responses will be kept private, and their participation will not result any negative consequences for them.

2.4.1.1 Informed Consent

Ensuring that participants understand the nature and risks of the research before the data collection is an essential condition. In this study, students were clearly informed about its purpose and their role in it. Participation was randomly selected from the whole group of

third year EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University, and they were free to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

2.4.1.2 Privacy and Confidentiality

This is about protecting participants' personal data and maintaining their anonymity. All data collected including student's questionnaires and teacher's interview were securely kept and used only for academic purposes. Participants were clearly informed of this before agreeing to take a part in the current study and before beginning to respond.

2.4.1.3 No problems and Hurts

One of the important ethical principles in any study is that the research should not cause harm or distress to any participants. Therefore, in this work, it was committed to minimizing risks to the lowest possible level while maximizing potential benefits, in order to make it valuable and to serve as a reference for future studies.

2.4.2 Honesty and Clarity

Honesty and clarity was ensured in this study by reporting the data accurately as they are, without any alteration or personal interference from the researcher in participants' responses, and by acknowledging all sources used in the research.

2.4.3 Building Trust between Participants

Research funding and public cooperation rely heavily on trust. Ethics ensure that this scientific research serves humanity rather than exploiting it.

2.4.4 Achieving the Main Goals of Research

The goal of research is to share knowledge and truth. Unethical practices mislead the scientific community and waste resources on wrong ideas.

Overall, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant authorities at the university as ethical standards were strictly followed to ensure the reliability and integrity of the research.

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a detailed explanation of the research methodology used to study how third year Licence EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University balance memorization and critical understanding in their learning process. By adopting a descriptive mixed methods approach within a case study, the research combined both quantitative and qualitative data to get a complete image of the students' learning experiences during their journey. The study focused on a sample of students who completed a structured questionnaire and teachers who participated in structured interviews to share their professional perspectives. These instruments were designed to explore the reasons behind learning experience and the effectiveness of deep comprehension in the classroom. Furthermore, the chapter also clarified the learning situation in which the present study was conducted and emphasized the importance of ethical standards, ensuring that all participants were treated with confidentiality and that their involvement was randomly chosen. All collected data were analyzed using percentages, tables, and figures descriptions to ensure the results are clear and credible. Ultimately, the methodological choices described here provide a strong and organized foundation for analyzing the findings and achieving research's aims.

Chapter Three

**Data Analysis, Interpretation,
and Recommendations**

3.1 Introduction

The third chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in this study. It focuses on examining EFL students' preferences for memorization and critical understanding, as well as their awareness of the relationship between these two learning strategies. It explores the main challenges students face when trying to balance both approaches. The data analyzed in this chapter were gathered through students' questionnaires and teachers' interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative results are presented and discussed together to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The findings are organized according to the research questions hypothesis and teacher's perceptions in order to highlight the insights related to students' learning strategies in the EFL context.

3.2 Analysis and Interpretation of Questionnaire Results

The descriptive analysis and interpretation of the results of the questionnaire discussed earlier is provided in this part using percentages presented in various tables and figures. All the questions and items are reformulated into a single format, indicated by this symbol (➤).

3.2.1 Section One: Background Information

The analysis of the first section includes students' gender, age, their secondary stream, years of studying English and whether they attempt to learn it outside the university.

Students' gender

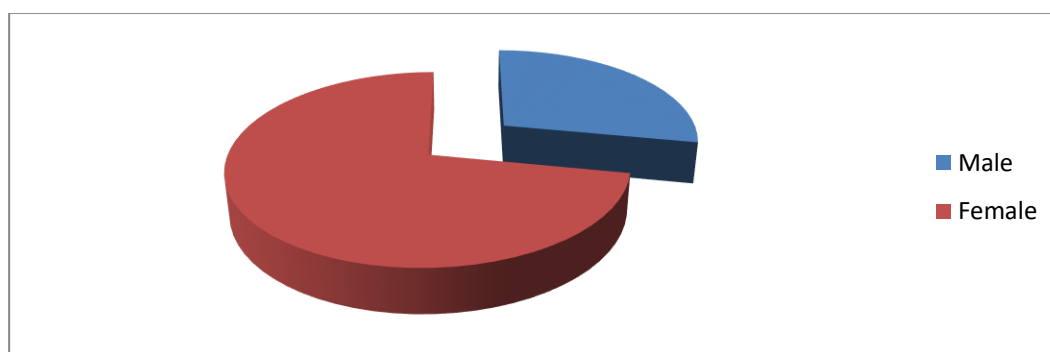


Fig 3.1: Students' Gender

The pie chart represents the participants' gender. It shows that the majority are females, representing approximately 73.5% of the sample, while males account for only about 26.5%. This indicates a noticeable gender disparity.

➤ **Students' age**

In the second question, students are asked about their age in order to provide a clearer profile and to better describe the sample on which the study is conducted. The results show that most of them are around 21 years old, and the oldest does not exceed 24 years. This reflects that they are nearly in the same age range, which enhances the reliability of the results.

➤ **Students' stream in secondary school**

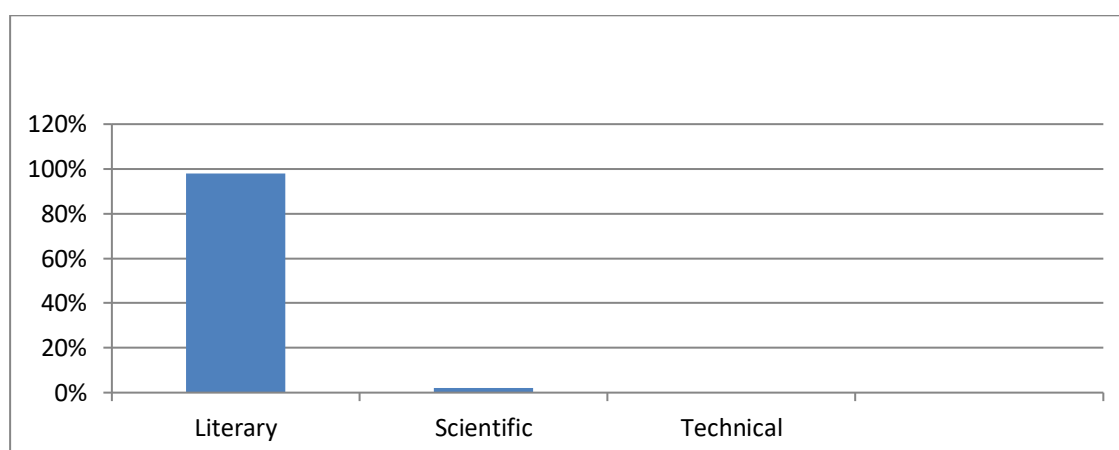


Fig 3.2: Secondary School Students' Stream

The results of question 3, which are presented in the above bar charts, show that the majority of participants (98%) came from a literary stream, while only a small percentage (2%) were scientific students, and none of them have a technical background. The provided answers suggest that these learners are more exposed to activities that require both memorization and critical understanding. Therefore, they are likely to be more familiar with the skills related to these two learning approaches.

➤ **Students' duration of studying English**

Table 3.1

Students' Years of Learning English

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Less than 4 years	1	2 %
4 – 7 years	10	20 %
7 – 10 years	29	58 %
More than 10 years	10	20 %
Total	50	100 %

Looking at students' educational background, the table shows that the majority of participants (58%) have between 7 and 10 years of learning English, while 20% study it for more than a decade. Another 20% study it for 4 to 7 years, leaving only 2% with less than 4 years of experience. These results indicate that almost all students had extensive exposure needed to develop their learning strategies.

➤ **Students' study of English outside the university context**

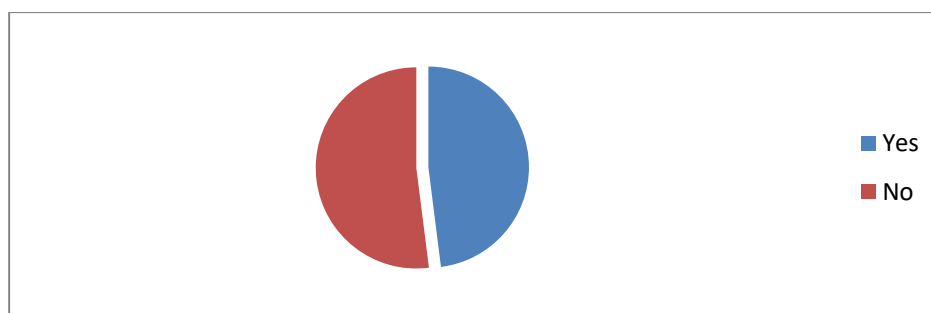


Fig 3.3: Students' Responses on Studying English outside the University

As shown in the pie chart, 52% of students report that they do not study English outside the university and rely solely on classroom learning. In contrast, 48% of respondents confirm that they attempt to enrich their knowledge beyond university lectures by studying independently. Since nearly half of the sample engages in learning English outside the university, this may lead to differences in their use of memorization, critical understanding, or a combination of both in the learning process.

3.2.2 Section Two: Memorization Practices

The analysis of the second section interprets the main factors that lead students to rely on memorization in their learning process.

➤ **Students' reliance on memorization as the easiest learning strategy**

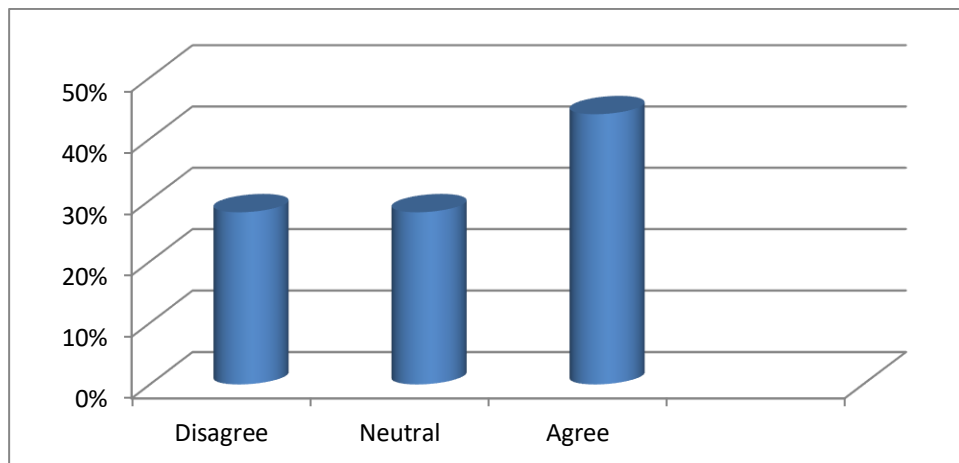


Fig 3.4: Students' Perceptions on Memorization as the Easiest Strategy

In this question, students are asked whether they rely on memorization because it is the easiest learning strategy. As presented in the bar chart above, 44% of participants agree with this statement, while 22% are neutral and another 22% disagree. This reflects that the simplicity of memorization can be a reason why EFL learners prefer it.

➤ **Students' reliance on memorization due to fear of misunderstanding lectures**

Table 3.2

Students' Fear-Based Use of Memorization

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	14	28%
Neutral	9	18%
Agree	27	54%
Total	50	100 %

Students are asked about another reason for their reliance on memorization, which is the fear of misunderstanding lectures. The majority of respondents (54%) agree with this statement, while 28% disagree and only 18% are neutral. This highlights another reason for

EFL learners' reliance on memorization as a learning strategy, namely the fear of misunderstanding lecture content.

➤ **Students' preference for memorization due to difficulty in understanding complex lectures**

Table 3.3

Students' Use of Memorization in Complex Lectures

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	12	24%
Neutral	12	24%
Agree	26	52%
Total	50	100 %

When students are asked whether they prefer memorization due to difficulty in understanding complex lectures, more than half (52%) agree that they choose memorization for the mentioned reason, while 24% are neutral and another 24% disagree. This reveals another important factor why students rely on memorization, which is the complexity of lectures. When they perceive that a lecture is quite hard to understand, they prefer memorization in order to avoid its difficulty.

➤ **Students' reliance on memorization to save time during exams**

Table 3.4

Students' Use of Memorization to Save Time in Exams

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	12	24%
Neutral	14	28%
Agree	24	48%
Total	50	100 %

Based on the statistics on students' reliance on memorization to save time during exams instead of engaging in critical understanding, the table indicates that nearly half of the

students (48%) agree that they rely on memorization to avoid spending too much time on critical understanding during exams, while 28% remain neutral and 24% disagree. This suggests that memorization is perceived by many students as a practical, time-saving strategy under exam pressure, even if it may limit deeper comprehension.

➤ **Students' memorization of lecture content without full understanding**

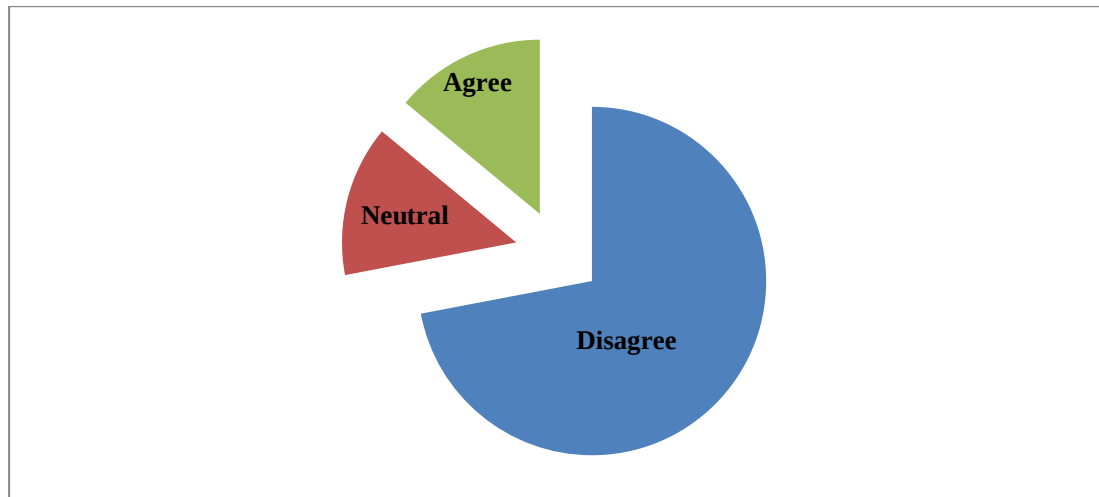


Fig 3.5: Students' Use of Memorization without Understanding

In item 10, participants are asked about their agreement with memorizing the lecture exactly as it is, even when they do not fully understand the content. A large percentage of learners (72%) disagree with memorizing lectures word for word without comprehension. Meanwhile, only 14% agree with this method, and another 14% remain neutral. These results show that most students believe that understanding the information is more important than simply memorizing it.

➤ **Note-taking and memorization of teachers' explanations without applying critical understanding**

Table 3.5

Students' Sole Use of Memorizing Teacher's Explanation

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	19	38%
Neutral	13	26%
Agree	18	36%
Total	50	100 %

The table for this question presents very close results among students regarding taking notes from the teacher's explanation and memorizing them without applying any critical understanding. A total of 38% of respondents disagree with this practice, while a similar percentage (36%) agree. The remaining 26% remain neutral on the matter. This nearly equal distribution suggests that while some students attempt to understand their notes deeply, many others still rely heavily on simple memorization after writing down the teacher's explanations.

➤ **Students' reliance on memorization due to exam requirements for recalling and reproducing information**

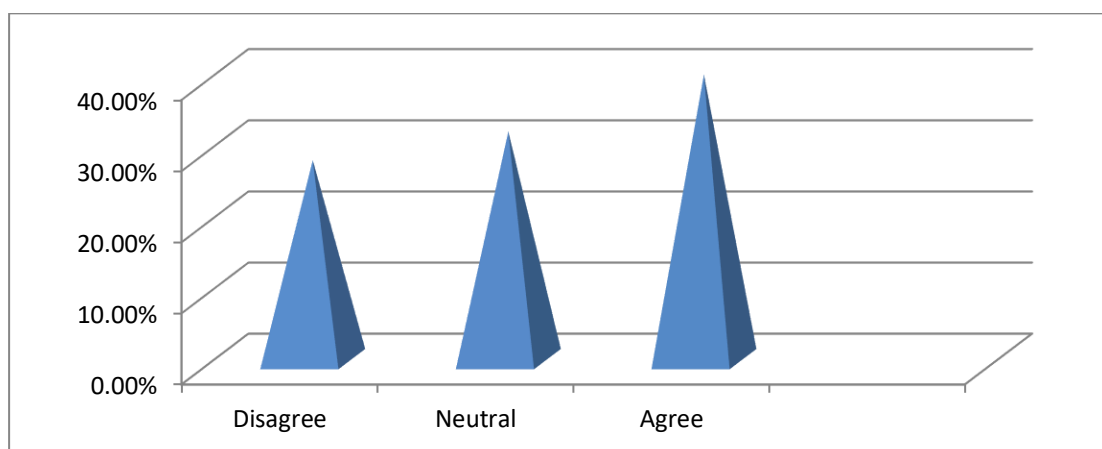


Fig 3.6: Students' Use of Memorization Due to Exam Requirements

In the last item of the second section of this questionnaire, the largest group of students (40%) agrees that they memorize because exam questions usually require them to repeat exactly what they had learned in lectures. Meanwhile, 32% are neutral and 28% disagree with this idea. This means that many students feel forced to use memorization because they believe it is the best way to achieve good marks in their exams.

3.2.3 Section Three: Critical Understanding Practices

The analysis of the third section highlights the extent to which third year EFL students use critical understanding and clarifies their perspectives on it.

➤ **Students' confidence from understanding lectures without relying on memorization**

Table 3.6

Students' Self-Assessment of Lectures Understanding

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Never	2	4%
Sometimes	24	48%
Always	24	48%
Total	50	100 %

When asking students whether they are confident in understanding lectures without relying on memorization, 48% of participants report that they are always confident, while another 48% state that they are sometimes confident. In contrast, only 4% of learners claim that they are never able to understand lectures without memorizing them. These results reflect the presence of critical understanding in their learning process, since the majority of respondents confirm that they are most of the time capable to understand lectures without relying on memorization.

➤ **Students' preference for understanding and self-explaining lectures**

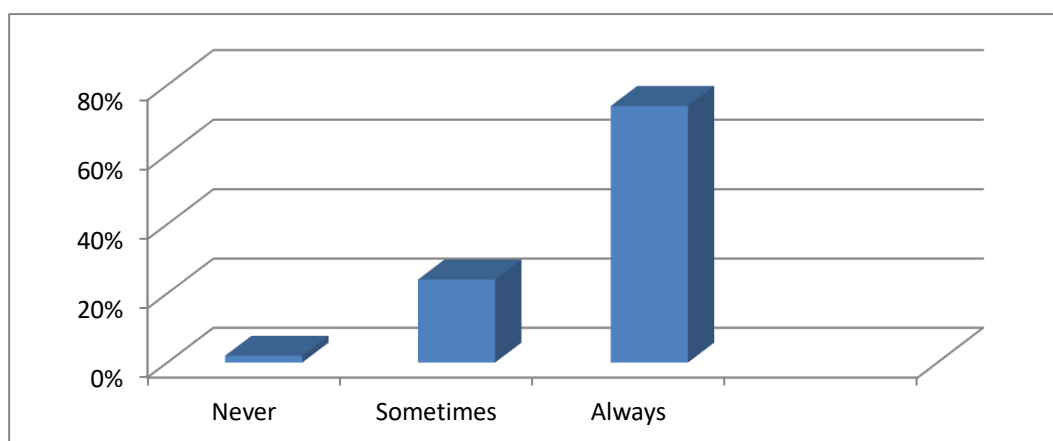


Fig 3.7 Students' Preference for Self-Explaining Lectures

Regarding students' ability to explain lectures in their own words, the results show a very strong preference for deep understanding. A significant proportion of students (74%) state that they always prefer to grasp the lecture content and explain it using their own vocabulary, while 24% report that they sometimes do so. Only 2% indicate that they never use this approach, suggesting that the vast majority of students value personal expression over repetition.

➤ **Students' perception of critical understanding as a tool to generate new ideas and express them independently**

Table 3.7

Students' Views on Critical Understanding for Generating Ideas

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Never	4	8%
Sometimes	22	44%
Always	24	48%
Total	50	100 %

When it comes to the link between critical understanding and creativity, the feedback is largely positive. Nearly half of the students (48%) report that they always believe critical understanding helps them generate and express new ideas, while 44% feel this way sometimes with only 8% responding "never". It is clear that most students see critical understanding as a vital tool for developing their own way of thinking.

➤ **Students' reliance on critical understanding as the best way to get good marks**

Table 3.8

Students' Use of Critical Understanding to Achieve Good Marks

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Never	3	6%
Sometimes	28	56%
Always	19	38%
Total	50	100 %

The data reveal that many students view critical understanding as a practical strategy for academic success. More than half (56%) report that they sometimes do so, while 38% state that they always rely on critical understanding because they believe it is the best way to achieve high grades. However, only 6% of respondents claim that they never see it as a primary way to improve their marks, indicating that most students perceive the importance of critical understanding and they associate it with better academic performance.

➤ **Students' reliance on the teacher's explanation instead of literal memorization**

Table 3.9

Students' Use of Teachers' Explanations rather than Memorization

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Never	11	22%
Sometimes	25	50%
Always	14	28%
Total	50	100 %

In terms of how students handle the teacher's explanations, the responses are quite mixed. Half of the participants (50%) declare that they sometimes rely on the teacher's explanation rather than memorizing every word, while 28% of participants always follow this approach. However, 22% never do this, which shows that a notable portion of the group still feel the need to stick closely to the exact words provided by the teacher.

➤ **Students' ability to understand the lecture critically and reformulate it**

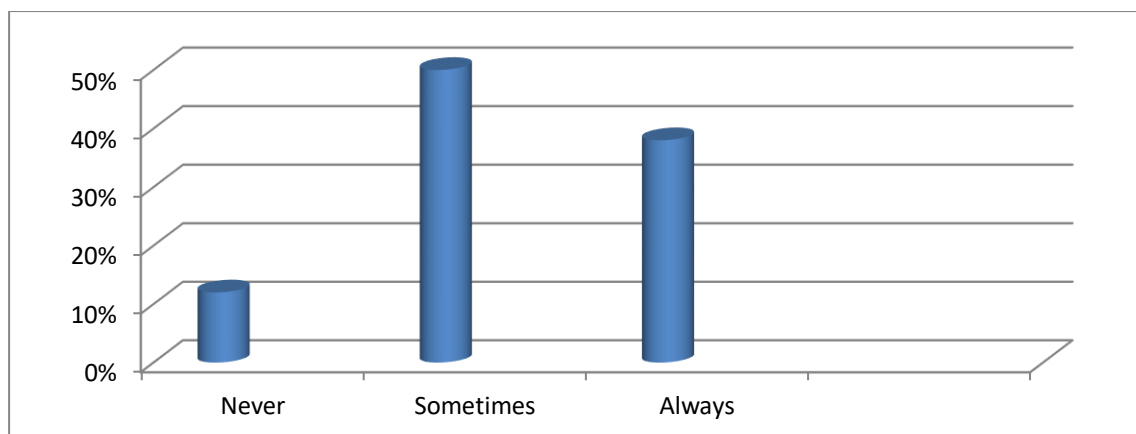


Fig 3.8: Students' Critical Understanding and Reformulating Lectures

When looking at students' ability to critically reformulate lessons using their own examples, the middle ground is the most common. Exactly 50% of students respond that they sometimes understand the lecture well enough to recreate it using new examples, and 38% can always do this. A small group of 12% never feels comfortable using this method. This shows that while most students are capable of this skill, many are still developing their confidence in it.

➤ **Students' preference for critical understanding during exams**

Table 3.10

Students' Use of Critical Understanding in Exams

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Never	8	16%
Sometimes	33	66%
Always	9	18%
Total	50	100 %

Concerning the preference for critical understanding during exams even when they focus on memorization, 66% of students believe that they sometimes prefer using critical understanding even when the exam focuses on memorization, while 18% always prefer it. Interestingly, 16% never choose critical understanding in this context. The high percentage of

“sometimes” responses indicates that learners occasionally rely on critical understanding when the exam is a memory-based and they don’t depend on it in all cases.

➤ **Students’ perception of critical understanding as beneficial method for exams**

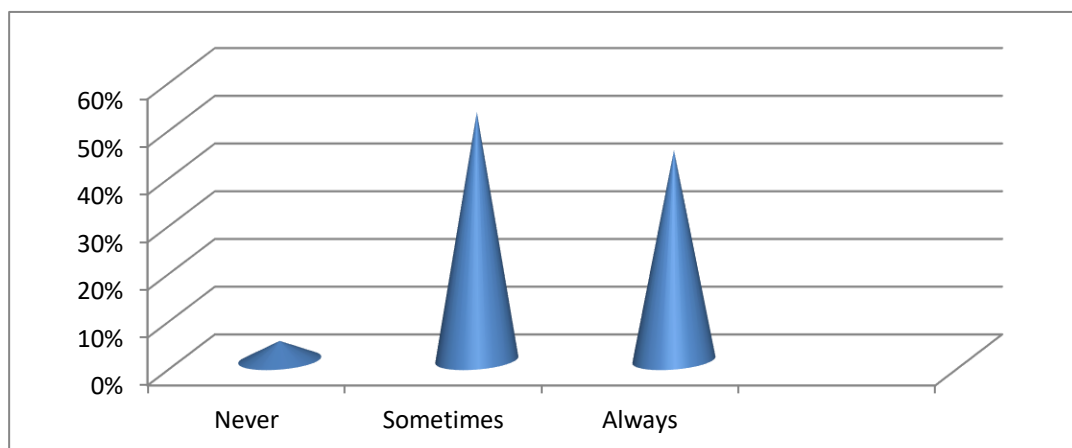


Fig 3.9: Students’ Views on the Effectiveness of Critical Understanding

Regarding the belief that critical understanding leads to better exam results, 52% of participants believe so sometimes, and 44% state that they always believe that it helps them perform well. Only a minority of 4% never associate critical understanding with good performance, which confirms that nearly all students trust that a deep understanding of the material is the key to their success.

3.2.4 Section Four: Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

The data obtained from the fourth section of this questionnaire are analyzed here in order to demonstrate students’ awareness of the effectiveness of combining the two approaches in learning English.

➤ **Students’ awareness of when to use memorization versus critical understanding**

Table 3.11

Students’ Awareness of When to Use the Two Approaches

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	2	4%
Neutral	22	44%
Agree	26	52%
Total	50	100 %

Moving to another section where both memorization and critical understanding are linked, students were first asked about their awareness of when to use memorization and when to use critical understanding. 52% of respondents agree that they are aware of when to use memorization versus critical understanding, and 44% remain neutral on this matter, while only 4% disagree. The observed results do not strongly confirm that EFL learners are highly aware of the requirements for using memorization or critical understanding. However, the proportion of responses remains acceptable, showing that half of the students confirm their awareness of this.

➤ **Students' belief in the effectiveness of both approaches to learning English**

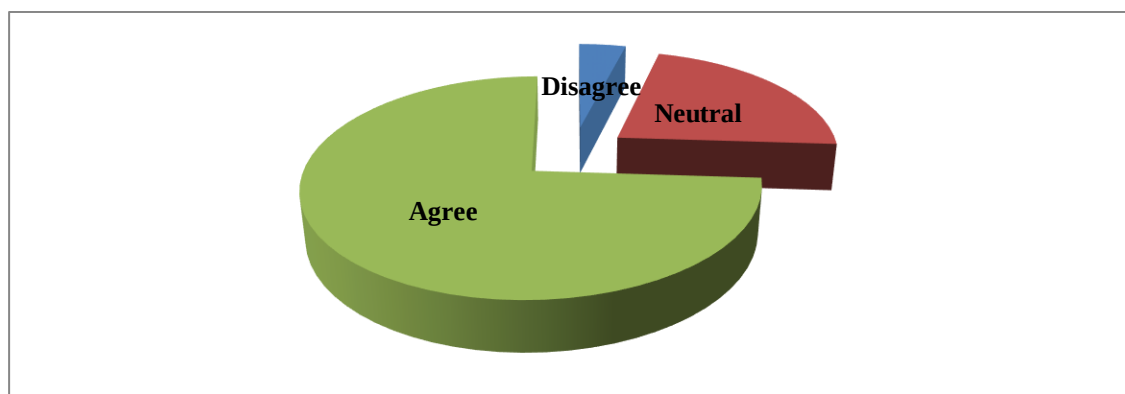


Fig 3.10: Students' Belief in the Effectiveness of Both Approaches

The above pie chart represents students' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of both memorization and critical understanding in learning English. As shown, most learners (72%) agree with the effectiveness of using both methods to learn English, while 22% are neutral and only 4% disagree. This indicates that the participants support the idea of balancing memorization and critical understanding as an effective, beneficial, and flexible approach in their learning process.

➤ **Students' use of the strategy of understanding lectures first to facilitate memorization**

Table 3.12

Students' Use of Critical Understanding to Support Memorization

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	3	6%
Neutral	9	18%
Agree	38	76%
Total	50	100 %

In a question addressing EFL learners' use of the strategy of understanding lectures first to facilitate memorization, the majority of students (76%) confirm that they follow this strategy in their learning and comprehension of lectures. Additionally, 18% report a neutral position, while 6% disagree with this approach, stating that it does not facilitate memorization and that they do not follow it. This indicates that adopting a sequence in which understanding comes first, followed by memorization, has positive outcomes and facilitates memorization for students in learning English, as it supports and simplifies the learning process.

➤ **Students' use of memorizing the information then understanding it critically**

Table 3.13

Students' Use of Memorization before Critical Understanding

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	9	18%
Neutral	24	48%
Agree	17	34%
Total	50	100 %

In this item, participants are asked about the opposite strategy, which is memorizing information first and then critically understanding it step by step. The results in the table

show that nearly half of the sample (48%) remain neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with this strategy, which may indicate that they apply it in some learning situations but not in others. It is also found that 44% of students agree with this approach, while 18% disagree, meaning that they neither rely on memorization first nor adopt this method. Overall, no clear conclusion can be drawn regarding this strategy, as the majority of students remained neutral, in contrast to the previous one where most respondents showed agreement.

➤ **Students' use of memorization to support critical understanding in exams**

Table 3.14

Students' Use of Memorization to Support Critical Understanding in Exams

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	3	6%
Neutral	22	44%
Agree	25	50%
Total	50	100 %

Here, students are specifically asked about their use of memorization as a tool to support their critical understanding during exams. Half of the sample (50%) agrees with this approach, while a slightly lower proportion (44%) remain neutral. However, only 6% state that they do not use memorization to strengthen their critical understanding when answering exam's questions. This confirms that memorization is not entirely a negative strategy; rather, it can be used to support critical understanding and enhance answers in exams.

➤ **Students' perception of balancing both approaches for better performance**

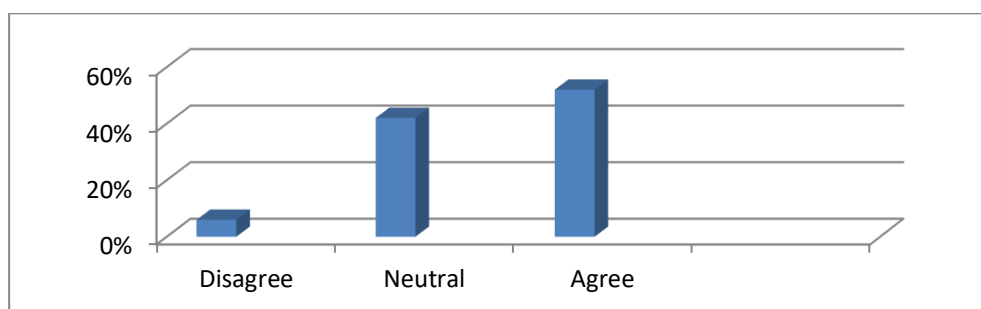


Fig 3.11 Students' Views on the Effectiveness of Balancing Both Approaches

The results obtained from students' responses regarding the balance between memorization and critical understanding for better performance are presented in the above bar charts. It can be observed that 52% of respondents agree with this idea, while approximately 42% are neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the balance between memorization and critical understanding for better performance. Only 6% disagree with this view. These findings confirm that combining memorization and critical understanding, and balancing both of them, lead to better results and a more effective learning process, as well as improve academic performance compared to using each strategy separately.

➤ **Students' belief that developing both memorization and critical understanding helps to answer indirect questions**

Table 3.15

Students' Belief in the Necessity of Developing Both Approaches

Options	Number of Students	Percentages
Disagree	6	12%
Neutral	10	20%
Agree	34	68%
Total	50	100 %

When students are asked about their belief that developing both memorization and critical understanding helps them answer indirect questions, even when these are not clearly explained during lectures, 68% of respondents agree with this statement, which represents a majority. Meanwhile, 20% remain neutral, and 12% disagree, stating that combining memorization and critical understanding does not help in answering indirect questions. These results highlight the importance of developing both strategies, as they appear to support students in answering various types of questions, including indirect ones, both in exams and in classroom contexts such as lectures and lessons.

➤ **Students' perception of exam questions and time pressure as barriers to critical understanding**

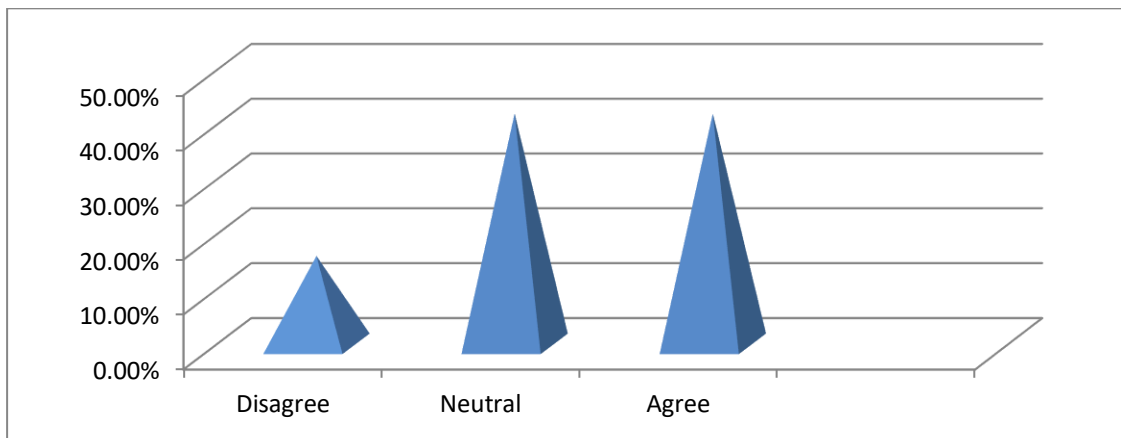


Fig 3.12: Perceived Barriers to Critical Understanding

This chart illustrates students' perceptions on whether exam questions and time pressure are considered as barriers to critical understanding. The results show that equal proportions are observed for agreement and neutrality, with 42% of participants agreeing that these factors constitute obstacles to developing or applying critical understanding, while another 42% remain neutral. In contrast, 16% disagree, indicating that time pressure and exam questions do not represent barriers to applying analysis, interpretation, or critical understanding.

The results suggest that exam conditions, such as the mentioned factors, may limit students' ability to apply their critical understanding, both in terms of comprehending the questions and providing in-depth answers derived from their own ideas. The high percentage of neutral responses indicates that students are uncertain about their position on this issue, as they neither fully agree nor disagree. This may suggest that, in some situations, students perceive these factors as barriers to applying critical understanding, while in other cases they may not experience such difficulties, possibly due to sufficient time being allocated during exams. However, the relatively high percentage of agreement cannot be overlooked, as it

confirms that both time pressure and the nature of exam questions are perceived as significant challenges to the application of critical understanding.

3.2.5 Section Five: Difficulties and Strategies in Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

The two open-ended questions in the last part of the questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively, through which students revealed their difficulties and strategies in balancing memorization and critical understanding.

➤ Students' difficulties in balancing memorization and critical understanding

Students were given the opportunity to express the difficulties they face when attempting to balance memorization and critical understanding. The responses revealed several common barriers, which can be categorized into linguistic challenges, time pressure, the nature of exam questions, the complexity of lectures, and the fear of misunderstanding the content. These findings indicate that, although students attempt to improve their ability to balance the two approaches, they continue to face these obstacles, particularly because they are not yet used to combining memorization and critical understanding effectively in their learning process.

➤ Students' strategies for balancing memorization and critical understanding

When asking students about what helps them improve their ability to balance memorization and critical understanding, the majority of participants state that they first try to understand the information and then memorize it. This approach makes memorization easier and helps the information remain in memory for a longer period. The respondents also report several strategies, including:

- They use memorization techniques such as mind maps and flashcards.
- They take notes from teachers' explanations to grasp the main points and facilitate understanding.

- They use AI tools to support comprehension of lesson content.
- They explain the lesson in their own words during memorization.
- They replace forgotten words from handouts with their own expressions.

This indicates that students attempt to use various strategies to develop their ability to balance both approaches in order to achieve better learning outcomes.

3.3 Analysis and Interpretation of Teachers' Interview Results

The following analysis and interpretation focuses on the interviewees' responses to the questions discussed in the previous chapter. They are reformulated into a single format, indicated by this symbol (✓).

✓ Academic qualifications

When asking teachers about their academic qualifications and degrees held, five teachers report holding a PhD, while one is still a candidate. Also, one teacher holds a Magister degree and another holds a Master's degree. The majority of the respondents possess high academic qualifications, which indicates that they are likely to be familiar with the learning approaches adopted by their students and the factors influencing their preferences.

✓ Teaching experience in higher education

The length of teachers' experience in university teaching is considered one of the key factors that enable them to develop the ability to deal with different types of learners and to understand their learning styles as well as their ways of processing information. The second question in this interview concerned the duration of teaching at university. One teacher reports that they have taught at the university for 14 years, one for 8 years, one for 7 years, two for 5 years, one for 4 years, one for 3 years, and another for 2 years. This question aims to determine the teachers' experience in the university context, which allows them to have a

better understanding of students' use of the learning approaches examined in the current study.

✓ **Factors leading to students' reliance on memorization**

In the third question, teachers are asked about the factors that lead students to rely on memorization rather than critical understanding. All teachers agree on the presence of three main factors, namely the lack of prior training in critical thinking and understanding skills before university, limited linguistic and cognitive background, and exam pressure. They also state that there are other factors that may lead students to move away from critical understanding and rely solely on memorization, which are as follows:

- It is the easy way for some.
- Most modules are concepts-based and the students are required to master the basic foundations of those modules. This leaves little room for critical understanding.
- Lack of confidence leads them to prefer memorization over understanding.

The teachers' responses to this question are closely aligned with what the students report in the questionnaire. This confirms that teachers are aware of their students' learning methods and preferences.

✓ **Encouraging students to develop a deeper understanding**

Teachers' support for their students in developing various skills, including a deep understanding of the lecture, plays a key role in promoting learners' engagement with the lesson and their comprehension of different types of information instead of memorizing it as it is. When asking teachers how they encourage their students to do so, all of them say that they create a discussion-based atmosphere in the classroom by asking questions about the lesson and giving learners the opportunity to express their different opinions. They also clarify that they do not rely only on questions that require memorization, but also include

analytical questions and invite students to provide examples from their daily life to help them connect concepts with practical situations. Furthermore, they added the following practices:

- Assigning problem-solving activities.
- Encouraging group works.
- Encouraging brainstorming by reading first, then talking freely about what they understood.

Overall, the teachers' responses indicate that they play an important role in the learning process. They strive to apply various practices to create a supportive and motivating classroom environment, enabling students to enhance their skills and actively engage with the lecture content, rather than merely repeating it word for word.

✓ **Teachers approaches to evaluating students learning**

Exam questions have a significant impact on students' preference for memorization or critical understanding in their learning journey. In this context, teachers were asked whether they test students' memorization or critical understanding in exams. Their responses reveal that five of them use a combination of both approaches. Two teachers claim that the choice between memorization-based and critical understanding questions depends largely on the modules they teach. As one teacher report:

“This depends largely on the nature of the module being taught, as well as the degree of difficulty in exam design. We usually start with simpler tasks based on memorization, but students are encouraged to reproduce knowledge in their own words, progressing to more challenging tasks. I personally try to maintain a balance between both.”

In addition, one teacher state that they do not assess learners' memorization at all. In the same vein, teachers are requested to justify their preference for memorization or critical understanding in designing their exam questions. They highlight that critical understanding is

one of the targeted skills in the 21st century; therefore, learners need to develop it rather than rely solely on memorization. They all agree that students should demonstrate mastery of the basic foundations of the subject before being given the opportunity to critically examine certain points. In addition, they state that the nature of the module also plays a role, as some modules rely mainly on memorization, while others do not.

✓ **Teachers' recommendations to achieve a better balance**

To conclude this interview, teachers are invited to share their recommendations for helping students achieve a better balance between memorization and critical understanding. Their responses provide valuable insights that may support learners in training their minds and enhancing their critical understanding skills. While they did not entirely deny the role of memorization, they emphasize that at university level, creativity and deeper understanding are very important rather than simply recalling information word for word. They recommend adopting teaching strategies that integrate both knowledge acquisition and analytical skills, and advise students to engage in critical activities and train their minds through active learning. Additionally, they encourage participation in discussions by raising debates, expressing ideas, and exchanging information with others. Moreover, teachers also provide these suggestions:

- Understand first, then memorize.
- Focus on concepts rather than just facts.
- Ask “how” and “why” questions, not only “what” questions.
- Familiarize students with a variety of situations to identify what to memorize and what to understand.
- Encourage students to do extra research.
- Use spaced repetition for memorization and apply knowledge through projects and problem-solving tasks.

To sum up, the teachers' suggestions shed light on the importance of balancing memorization and critical understanding for students. While memorization helps learners retain information, critical understanding enables them to apply and use this knowledge in their daily lives in a meaningful way.

3.4 Summary of the Main Findings

The key results obtained from the students' questionnaire and the teachers' interview contribute to achieving the research objectives, validating the proposed hypotheses, and answering the questions raised in this study.

The main factors that lead EFL students to rely more on memorization during their learning process can be summarized in the perception that memorization is the easiest learning strategy, as it does not require much time for analysis, interpretation, or deep understanding of the material. This reliance is also linked to the fear of misunderstanding lectures, especially when they are complex. Additionally, most exam questions are seen as requiring the recall and reproduction of information exactly as presented in lectures. These reasons are strongly supported by teachers. However, students also make efforts to understand the information while memorizing it. Likewise, when taking notes from teachers' explanations, they do not simply copy the information but express it in their own words, reflecting a certain level of critical understanding.

Moreover, memorization and critical understanding are not viewed as opposing strategies, but rather as complementary approaches. Many students reported using memorization to support their understanding, especially during exams, and believe that combining both strategies improves their performance. Similarly, teachers confirmed that effective learning requires a balance, as students must first master basic knowledge before moving toward deeper understanding. In fact, most teachers design their assessments to

include both recall based and analytical questions, which further encourages students to integrate both approaches in their learning process.

However, achieving this balance remains challenging. Students claimed that they encounter several difficulties in knowing when to use both approaches, and many struggles to apply critical understanding under exam conditions due to time pressure and the structure of questions. Teachers acknowledge these challenges and point out that the educational system and module requirements sometimes limit opportunities for deeper understanding. As a result, students often shift back to memorization, especially in hard situations, even when they value critical understanding.

Finally, the study concludes that while both students and teachers are aware of the importance of integrating memorization and critical understanding, there is still a gap between awareness and actual practice. The findings emphasize that effective EFL learning depends on a balanced approach where memorization provides the necessary foundation, and critical understanding allows learners to apply, analyze, and use knowledge meaningfully. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding this process by adopting interactive teaching methods and designing assessments that promote both recall and deep understanding.

3.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to help EFL students achieve a better balance between memorization and critical understanding.

3.5.1 Recommendations for Students

In order to achieve a balance between memorization and critical understanding, students should be encouraged to adopt learning practices that help them become aware of when and how to use each approach effectively.

3.5.1.1 Promoting Independent Learning

Students are motivated to extend their learning beyond the classroom. Engaging in independent learning activities such as reading, watching English videos, and practicing writing or speaking can enhance both memorization and critical understanding. This allows learners to connect theoretical knowledge with real-life use.

3.5.1.2 Students' Learning Strategies

Students should develop effective learning strategies that combine both memorization and critical understanding. Teachers can support this by training learners on how to paraphrase, summarize, analyze information, and connect ideas. Developing these skills will help students better understand the subject instead of relying solely on memorization.

3.5.1.3 Time Management and Exam Strategies

Since time pressure is one of the reasons that forces students to rely on memorization, they should necessarily be trained in time management skills. They have to learn how to plan their answers, quickly analyze exam questions, and organize their ideas effectively. This can help them apply critical understanding even under exam conditions.

3.5.2 Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers play a crucial role in the learning journey, as they are the first guides who help students create an appropriate and comfortable learning atmosphere that integrates and supports both approaches.

3.5.2.1 Teacher's Requirements

Teachers are encouraged to adopt balanced teaching approaches that integrate both memorization and critical understanding. While memorization is important for acquiring vocabulary and grammar and it seems the easiest way for many students to pass their exams, it should not be the only strategy used in the classroom. Teachers should incorporate activities that promote deeper learning, such as discussions, problem-solving tasks, text

analysis, and real-life applications. These practices can help students actively engage with the content and develop their critical understanding skills.

3.5.2.2 Assessment Design

It is recommended that exam questions should be designed to assess not only memorization but also higher-order thinking skills. They should require analysis, interpretation, and application that encourage learners to adopt critical understanding beside memorization. A balanced assessment system will make learners use both strategies and move beyond recalling the information as it is.

3.5.2.3 Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Teachers should work on reducing students' fear of misunderstanding lectures by creating a supportive and interactive classroom environment. Encouraging students to ask questions participate in discussions, and express their opinions can help them feel more confident and reduce their dependence on memorization as a safe strategy.

3.5.3 Recommendations for Curriculum Designers

Curriculum designers should ensure that course content supports a gradual progression from memorization to critical understanding. Lessons should begin with foundational knowledge and move toward deeper understanding. This progression will help students naturally develop a balance between the two approaches.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has analyzed and interpreted the data obtained from both students and teachers regarding the use of memorization and critical understanding in EFL learning. The findings show that while students tend to rely on memorization due to exam pressure and learning difficulties, they are also aware of the importance of critical understanding for deeper learning. The results also reveal that both approaches are complementary rather than contradictory, but students often face challenges in balancing

them effectively. These difficulties are influenced by factors such as teaching methods, assessment types, and students' language proficiency. Accordingly, it highlights some recommendations for students, teachers, and curriculum designers to help achieve a better balance between memorization and critical understanding in learners' journey. Overall, this chapter provides important insights into students' learning behaviors and highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates memorization and critical understanding.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

Achieving a balance between memorization and critical understanding is essential for meaningful learning and deep comprehension in the EFL context. While memorization enables learners to store vocabulary, key expressions, and grammatical structures, critical understanding allows them to comprehend, interpret, and analyze information. These two approaches are complementary, and maintaining a balance between them provides students with the opportunity not only to store information but also to grasp its real meaning and apply it in new situations, which enhances their higher-order thinking skills and makes them more effective learners.

In order to investigate this issue, the current study was conducted to explore the balance between memorization and critical understanding in the EFL learning context among third-year Licence students at Ahmed Zabana University in Relizane. To achieve this aim, two data collection instruments were used: a questionnaire administered to the target students and interviews conducted with EFL teachers at the same university to gather comprehensive data on their perceptions and practices.

The key findings validate the proposed hypotheses and address the research questions. They indicate that the main factors influencing EFL students' preferences for either memorization or critical understanding include teaching methods, exam requirements, the complexity of lectures, fear of misunderstanding, learners' background and linguistic limitations, as well as time pressure, especially during exams. The results also show that students have a noticeable awareness of the importance of balancing both approaches in their learning process, as most of them recognize the role of both memorization and critical understanding in enhancing their skills and supporting their academic progress. However, in actual practice, they still face difficulties in applying these approaches effectively due to various challenges.

In line with this, it was also hypothesized that EFL students struggle when they attempt to balance both approaches due to different challenges such as lack of practice, exam pressure, time constraints, and limited language proficiency. The findings confirm that these obstacles are indeed faced by learners. Moreover, when dealing with complex lectures, students tend to rely mainly on memorization, even though they recognize the importance of critical understanding. Thus, this indicates a gap between awareness and practice in their learning process.

From a practical point of view, several implications can be drawn. First, students need to adopt more flexible and effective learning strategies that go beyond rote memorization. In addition, teachers are encouraged to create interactive learning environments that promote discussion, analysis, and active participation. Moreover, assessment methods should be reconsidered in order to include tasks that require interpretation and application rather than focusing solely on recall. By doing so, students will be more likely to develop both memorization and critical understanding skills simultaneously.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this study is not without limitations. Firstly, it was conducted within a specific context, namely third-year EFL students at Ahmed Zabana University, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the relatively small sample size may not fully represent all EFL learners. In addition, the study relies on questionnaires and interviews, which are based on self-reported data and may be influenced by participants' perceptions. Furthermore, other research methods, such as classroom observation, were not included, which could have provided deeper insights into actual learning practices.

Given these limitations, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. Further studies should be conducted in different educational contexts and with larger samples in order to obtain more generalizable results. Furthermore, they could incorporate additional

methods, such as experimental studies, to better understand how learning strategies develop over time. It would also be beneficial to investigate the effectiveness of specific teaching techniques that aim to balance memorization and critical understanding. Finally, more attention should be given to examining the direct relationship between these learning strategies and students' academic performance.

Overall, it can be stated that memorization and critical understanding are not contradictory but rather complementary elements in the EFL learning process. While memorization ensures the acquisition of essential knowledge, critical understanding enables learners to use this knowledge meaningfully and effectively. Therefore, achieving a balance between these two approaches is essential for improving students' learning outcomes and fostering more autonomous and competent language users.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Students' Questionnaire

Dear L3 Students,

This questionnaire aims to explore the extent to which EFL students rely on memorization , critical understanding , or a combination of both in their learning process . You are kindly invited to complete it , as your participation will contribute significantly to achieving the research objectives. Please be assured that all information provided will be used solely for academic purposes.

Thanks in advance

Mark (✓) the appropriate answer

Section One: Background Information

1- Gender ☐Male

☐Female

2- Age

3- Which stream did you study in secondary school ?

☐Literary

☐Scientific

☐Technical

4- How long have you been studying English ?

☐Less than 4 years

☐4 – 7 years

☐7 – 10 years

☐More than 10 years

5- Do you study English outside the university context?. ☐Yes☐No***Section Two: Memorization Practices***

	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>
6- I rely on memorization because it is the easiest learning strategy for me.			
7- I depend on memorization because I am afraid of misunderstanding the lectures.			
8- I feel more comfortable memorizing because I struggle to understand complex lectures.			
9- I rely on memorization to avoid spending too much time engaging in critical understanding during exams.			
10- I memorize the lecture exactly as it is, even when I do not fully understand the content.			
11- I take notes from the teacher's explanations, but I memorize them without applying any critical understanding.			
12- I rely on memorization because most exam questions require recalling and reproducing information exactly as presented in the lectures.			

Section Three : Critical Understanding Practices

	<u>Never</u>	<u>Sometime</u>	<u>Always</u>
13- I feel confident when I understand the lecture deeply without reliance on memorization .			

14- I like to understand the lecture and explain it in my own words.			
15- I think that critical understanding is good for me because it helps me generate new ideas and express them in my own words			
16- I rely on critical understanding because it seems to be the best way to get good marks.			
17- I rely on the teacher's explanation rather than memorizing every single word.			
18- I understand the lecture critically and reformulate it in my own style by using new examples.			
19- I prefer critical understanding even when the exam focuses on memorization.			
20- I believe that critical understanding helps me perform well in exams.			

Section Four : Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>
21- I am fully aware of when I should memorize information and when I should understand it critically.			
22- I believe that both memorization and critical understanding are effective approaches to learning English.			
23- I try to understand the lectures first, which then makes it easier for me to remember and memorize the information.			
24- I memorize the information well and then begin to understand it critically step by step.			
25- I memorize information in order to support my critical			

understanding when answering exam questions.			
26- Balancing memorization and critical understanding helps me perform very well in both classroom activities and exams.			
27- Developing both memorization and critical understanding skills enables me to answer indirect questions, even when they are not clearly explained in the lecture.			
28- Exam questions and time pressure create barriers to applying critical understanding.			

Section Five: Difficulties and Strategies in Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding

29- What difficulties do you face when trying to balance memorization and critical understanding?

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30- What helps you improve your ability to balance memorization and critical understanding?

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Appendix B

Teachers' Interview

We are Master II students conducting research entitled “ *Balancing Memorization and Critical Understanding in the EFL Learning Context: An Exploratory Study of Third-Year Licence Students at Relizane University* ”. We kindly ask for your participation in this interview that will greatly contribute to the success of our study. Please be assured that all opinions and responses provided will be used solely for academic research purposes.

1- What are your academic qualifications?

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.....

2- How many years have you been teaching at university?

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3- Based on your teaching experience, why do students rely on memorization rather than critical understanding?

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4- During your lectures, how do you encourage students to develop a deeper understanding of the lesson content?

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5- Do your exam questions mainly test students' memorization or their critical understanding?

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Why?

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6- What are your recommendations to help students achieve a better balance between memorization and critical understanding?

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Thank you for your cooperation

