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Memorization strategy and foreign language learnings: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Memorization strategies play an essential role in foreign language acquisition, affecting both short-term retention and long-term fluency. This narrative review explores the intersection of cognitive science and language pedagogy by evaluating techniques such as spaced repetition, mnemonics, and visual imagery. The review also examines how factors like motivation, context, and individual learning styles influence memorization effectiveness. Synthesizing findings from recent studies, it identifies strategies most beneficial to learners across proficiency levels. The results suggest that integrating memorization methods with contextual and communicative practices significantly enhances vocabulary retention and overall language competence. Practical implications for both teachers and learners are presented, with a focus on optimizing language instruction through adaptive and reflective learning environments.

Keywords

memorization strategies, foreign language learning, spaced repetition, vocabulary retention, mnemonics, cognitive load, long-term memory, contextual learning

1. Introduction

Memorization plays a foundational role in foreign language learning, especially in the early stages when vocabulary and basic grammar form the core of communicative competence. For learners attempting to acquire a language outside of immersive environments, memorization becomes a key cognitive strategy to internalize and retrieve linguistic material (Majid, 2024; Alisoy, 2024). The success of language acquisition is closely tied to how effectively learners can recall and apply lexical and structural elements in real contexts.

While some traditional language teaching methods have emphasized rote learning, modern approaches underscore the value of strategic memorization—using tools and techniques that enhance long-term retention, learner autonomy, and context-based application (Mammadova, 2024; Islam et al., 2025). For instance, mnemonic devices, spaced repetition algorithms, visual mapping, and even AI-assisted language platforms have evolved to support learners' memory retention in more engaging and personalized ways (Alisoy, 2025; Taraskevičius, 2024).

Moreover, memorization does not occur in a vacuum. Learners' motivation, cognitive load, personal learning preferences, and even sociocultural background shape the strategies they adopt and how effective

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those strategies are (Natarajan & Pez, 2024; Sadiqzade, 2024). What works for a beginner in a multilingual classroom may differ significantly from what an intermediate learner in a monolingual context requires.

This **narrative review** aims to explore and synthesize current research on memorization strategies in foreign language learning. It outlines cognitive and technological techniques that enhance vocabulary retention, examines learner-specific factors that mediate strategy success, and highlights pedagogical recommendations for integrating memorization within communicative and contextual teaching frameworks. Through this lens, the review offers insights for educators seeking to design more effective language instruction and for learners aiming to boost their memory-related learning outcomes.

2. Definition of Key Concepts

To fully understand the role of memorization in foreign language acquisition, it is important to clarify several foundational concepts: memorization, memorization strategies, and foreign language learning. These terms serve as the conceptual framework for the subsequent analysis.

Memorization refers to the cognitive process of encoding, storing, and retrieving information for later use. In the context of language learning, it involves retaining new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and functional expressions. As noted by Majid (2024), memorization is not a passive act of repetition but an active and intentional process that requires meaningful engagement with linguistic input. From both psychological and pedagogical perspectives, memorization serves as the link between exposure to language and communicative competence.

Memorization strategies are the specific techniques learners use to enhance the efficiency and durability of this process. These strategies can range from rote repetition to more sophisticated techniques such as mnemonics, chunking, visual imagery, and spaced repetition (Alisoy, 2025; Islam et al., 2025). For example, spaced repetition systems (SRS) have been shown to improve vocabulary recall by timing reviews at optimal intervals (Taraskevičius, 2024), while mnemonic devices help learners associate unfamiliar terms with familiar concepts or imagery (Acosta Camacho, 2024).

Foreign language learning involves the acquisition of a language that is not the learner's mother tongue. This process encompasses multiple components—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Importantly, successful language learning is not solely dependent on exposure, but on the learner's ability to internalize and retrieve language through consistent and strategic practice (Mammadova, 2024). Memorization plays a particularly crucial role in the early stages of language learning, where rapid vocabulary acquisition forms the bedrock for communication.

Furthermore, memorization strategies are not universally effective for all learners. Factors such as individual learning preferences, age, cultural background, and technological access all influence how these strategies are adopted and applied (Natarajan & Pez, 2024; Sadiqzade, 2025). Therefore, understanding memorization requires not only a cognitive framework but also a learner-centered perspective.

By establishing clear definitions of these key terms, this review sets the stage for a more detailed discussion of the theoretical background and practical applications of memorization in foreign language learning.



3. Theoretical Background

Memorization in foreign language learning is best understood through an interdisciplinary lens that brings together cognitive psychology, pedagogy, and sociocultural theory. This section outlines the principal theoretical frameworks that support the use of memorization strategies, emphasizing how memory processes, learning styles, and teaching contexts influence the effectiveness of these approaches.

3.1. Memory Models and Language Learning

One of the core cognitive models underpinning memorization is the multi-store model of memory, which distinguishes between short-term memory (STM) and long-term memory (LTM). According to Majid (2024), language learners often begin by encoding new vocabulary through repetition and rehearsal in STM before transferring it to LTM for lasting retention. This transfer can be facilitated by structured techniques like mnemonics and spaced repetition, which strengthen neural pathways involved in recall (Taraskevičius, 2024).

Working memory theories also contribute to this understanding. Learners actively manipulate linguistic input—grouping, visualizing, and repeating items—to increase the likelihood of storing them long-term. These cognitive operations are foundational for language learners who must remember unfamiliar words, phrases, and structures while simultaneously processing input.

3.2. Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies such as repetition, elaboration, and association allow learners to link new knowledge with prior experiences or linguistic patterns (Majid, 2024). These methods are particularly effective when combined with metacognitive strategies—those that involve reflection and self-regulation. Learners who monitor their progress and adapt their methods according to task demands tend to experience better long-term retention (Islam et al., 2025).

Alisoy (2025) points out that ESL learners who personalize their memorization processes—for example, by creating digital flashcards or using imagery related to their cultural background—often show more motivation and vocabulary mastery. This supports the idea that memorization should not be viewed as a rigid process but rather as a flexible set of tools that learners can adapt to their individual cognitive profiles.

3.3. Contextual and Communicative Approaches

While traditional memory-based learning emphasizes internal processes, contextual learning theories highlight the importance of environment, interaction, and usage. Acosta Camacho (2024) demonstrates how engaging learners in life-story activities and participatory projects can enhance vocabulary retention by embedding it in personally meaningful contexts. Similarly, Islam et al. (2025) stress that memorized vocabulary is more easily recalled and effectively used when learners encounter it in communicative tasks, such as storytelling or classroom discussion.

This perspective aligns with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, which prioritize authentic use of language over isolated drills. In these contexts, memorization becomes integrated into broader learning goals—promoting not just retention, but fluent and functional usage.



3.4. The Role of Technology and Artificial Intelligence

Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping memorization strategies. Language-learning applications like Anki, Quizlet, and Memrise incorporate spaced repetition algorithms that adapt review schedules based on user performance (Taraskevičius, 2024; Лощагин, 2024). These platforms enable learners to focus on weak areas and reinforce retention in a personalized, data-driven manner.

Alisoy (2025) notes that AI-powered systems can significantly improve learner outcomes by tracking behavior, offering tailored feedback, and motivating users with gamified elements. These tools not only automate memorization but also provide learners with autonomy and flexibility, making the process more engaging and efficient.

3.5. Critical Pedagogy and Sociocultural Factors

Finally, critical pedagogy reminds educators that language learning is not value-neutral. Natarajan and Pez (2024) argue that effective memorization strategies must be responsive to learners' cultural identities and lived experiences. A uniform approach may ignore the unique ways students from different backgrounds engage with memory and language.

This view is supported by Mammadova (2024), who emphasizes the need for motivational frameworks that connect vocabulary with real-world, socially relevant content. When memorization is embedded in students' personal, social, and cultural contexts, it fosters deeper emotional and cognitive engagement.

4. Types of Memorization Strategies

Memorization strategies in foreign language learning are varied and adaptable, shaped by cognitive preferences, instructional environments, and technological tools. This section presents the most commonly researched and applied techniques, highlighting their benefits, limitations, and instructional relevance. Drawing on current studies, the strategies below are organized into key categories.

4.1. Repetition (Rote Learning)

Repetition—especially rote memorization—remains one of the oldest and most widely used strategies for acquiring vocabulary and grammar. It involves the frequent rehearsal of information until it can be recalled with accuracy. Despite criticism for promoting surface-level learning, it continues to play a role in establishing foundational vocabulary, especially among beginner learners (Majid, 2024; Mammadova, 2024).

In traditional classrooms, drills, flashcards, and vocabulary lists are commonly used to reinforce memorization. Alisoy (2024) notes that while rote learning may lack the depth of contextual strategies, it offers predictable structure and familiarity, particularly in large, mixed-ability groups where individualized instruction is limited.



4.2. Mnemonics

Mnemonic devices assist learners in recalling unfamiliar words by linking them to meaningful cues—such as rhymes, acronyms, visual associations, or storytelling. These techniques are especially useful when vocabulary items are abstract or unrelated to the learner’s native language.

For instance, learners might associate the English word “*subtle*” with the phrase “*a subtle submarine*” to create a mental image (Cohen & Beckman, n.d.). Acosta Camacho (2024) further emphasizes the effectiveness of using culturally relevant imagery, arguing that mnemonics rooted in personal or local narratives enhance retention and emotional connection to language content.

The keyword method, where foreign words are paired with similar-sounding native language words, is another proven mnemonic technique that facilitates recall through phonological and semantic links (Majid, 2024).

4.3. Chunking and Association

Chunking involves breaking language into smaller, meaningful units, such as word families, collocations, or short phrases. This approach mirrors the way native speakers process language, helping learners internalize common patterns rather than isolated vocabulary.

Majid (2024) and Sadiqzade (2025) note that learners who group vocabulary thematically—such as “food words,” “travel expressions,” or “phrasal verbs”—tend to retain and retrieve language more efficiently. Associative learning, meanwhile, builds connections between new and known content, allowing learners to tie vocabulary to personal memories, emotions, or familiar contexts.

4.4. Spaced Repetition

Spaced repetition is a scientifically validated technique where information is reviewed at increasing intervals to optimize long-term retention. It prevents the “forgetting curve” by reintroducing content just before it would otherwise be forgotten.

Islam et al. (2025) highlight the pedagogical impact of spaced repetition systems (SRS) such as Anki, Quizlet, and Memrise. These tools use algorithms to schedule reviews based on learner performance, ensuring that challenging items are revisited more frequently while mastered items are spaced further apart. Taraskevičius (2024) affirms that learners who use these platforms demonstrate higher vocabulary retention rates compared to those using linear or massed repetition.

4.5. Mind Maps and Visual Tools

Visual mapping strategies, such as mind maps, concept diagrams, and illustrated vocabulary banks, appeal to learners with strong visual-spatial intelligence. These tools help learners organize vocabulary thematically, making relationships between concepts more explicit.

Mind maps allow students to create visual clusters of related words, such as verbs of motion or adjectives of emotion. This visualization supports memory by reinforcing conceptual links (Natarajan & Pez, 2024).



Flashcards with images, color-coded grammar charts, and visual storyboards are also useful in reinforcing memory through multisensory engagement.

In digital environments, learners can enhance their visual memorization through apps that include icons, animations, and interactive interfaces (Люцагин, 2024). These tools not only reinforce retention but also foster motivation by offering an engaging and personalized experience.

Together, these strategies provide a repertoire of tools that learners and educators can adapt based on age, proficiency level, motivation, and learning preferences. In the next section, the article synthesizes recent narrative review findings, comparing the effectiveness of these strategies across diverse contexts.

5. Narrative Review Findings

This section synthesizes key findings from the reviewed literature, focusing on the effectiveness, adaptability, and pedagogical implications of various memorization strategies. The findings reveal that no single strategy works universally; rather, effectiveness depends on the learner's age, proficiency level, motivation, and the learning context.

5.1. Effectiveness of Memorization Techniques

Traditional repetition continues to be widely used, especially in settings where structured learning environments dominate. Majid (2024) confirms that rote learning can efficiently build basic vocabulary, especially for beginner learners. However, its benefits tend to diminish for advanced students or when deeper semantic processing is required.

Mnemonic devices, particularly those using visual or auditory associations, were found to significantly improve recall. Acosta Camacho (2024) reports that mnemonic strategies leveraging imagery or storytelling enhance engagement and support memory consolidation. Learners who form personal associations or embed words in emotional narratives often outperform those relying solely on repetition.

The most consistently effective technique across proficiency levels is spaced repetition. Islam et al. (2025) and Taraskevičius (2024) both highlight the success of SRS platforms such as Anki and Quizlet in facilitating long-term vocabulary retention. These tools align with cognitive theories of distributed practice, providing learners with optimal review intervals and immediate feedback.

5.2. Role of Age, Motivation, and Proficiency

Age and learner maturity influence strategy preferences and outcomes. Younger learners often benefit more from visual and game-based techniques, such as flashcards and mind maps, due to their developmental stage and attention span (Alisoy, 2024). In contrast, adult learners frequently show better results with structured tools like SRS or written self-quizzing, which demand more focused attention and metacognitive regulation (Mammadova, 2024).

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, is a powerful mediator of memorization success. Learners who are personally invested in mastering a language—whether for academic, professional, or emotional reasons—tend to persist with complex strategies and demonstrate greater vocabulary gains (Natarajan & Pez, 2024).



This is particularly evident when learners personalize their study routines or choose strategies that resonate with their identity and goals.

Proficiency level also shapes strategic needs. Beginners may rely more on rote repetition and mnemonic cues to establish a foundational lexicon. However, intermediate and advanced learners benefit more from chunking, contextual learning, and semantic mapping, which enable them to process vocabulary in meaningful units rather than isolated terms (Majid, 2024; Sadiqzade, 2025).

5.3. Technology Integration and Personalization

The increasing integration of AI and digital platforms in language education has changed the landscape of vocabulary learning. Alisoy (2025) and Лощагин (2024) stress the benefits of adaptive systems that analyze learner behavior and adjust content delivery accordingly. These systems support differentiated learning and foster greater learner autonomy.

Digital flashcard systems, gamified apps, and AI-powered tutors not only track performance but also offer immediate reinforcement, encouraging continued engagement. Moreover, learners with limited classroom support can still access structured vocabulary training at home, making technology a bridge for equity and accessibility.

5.4. Contextual and Communicative Learning

Contextualizing vocabulary through meaningful use—such as storytelling, dialogue, and participatory tasks—enhances retention and transfer to real-life use. Islam et al. (2025) found that students participating in the Muhadatsah Program, which emphasizes communicative and contextual approaches, showed significantly improved speaking skills and vocabulary application.

Acosta Camacho (2024) similarly highlights the power of life-story projects and visual narratives to create emotional and cognitive connections between learners and new language. In these contexts, memorization becomes more than recall—it evolves into ownership and expression.

5.5. Strategy Limitations and Learner Variability

While effective, each memorization strategy also has limitations. Rote learning can become tedious and superficial. Mnemonics may help with individual word recall but do not necessarily aid in productive usage or grammar. Visual strategies may be less effective for learners with auditory learning preferences, and overreliance on apps can lead to passive learning if not balanced with interaction and reflection (Natarajan & Pez, 2024).

The findings underscore that there is no universal method. Educators must be prepared to combine strategies and differentiate instruction based on learners' cultural backgrounds, goals, and cognitive profiles (Sadiqzade, 2024). Strategy training and regular reflection can also help learners identify which tools are most effective for them.



6. Practical Implications for Learners and Teachers

The integration of memorization strategies into foreign language education has significant practical value. Whether used in classrooms or independent learning, these strategies can enhance vocabulary acquisition, promote long-term retention, and foster learner autonomy. This section outlines key implications for both teachers and learners, emphasizing how memorization techniques can be effectively implemented and adapted.

6.1. Memorization Strategies in the Classroom

For Teachers: Educators can enhance vocabulary retention by incorporating a blend of memorization strategies into their instructional design. For beginner learners, repetition and rote learning methods—such as vocabulary drills, flashcards, and timed quizzes—can build foundational vocabulary (Majid, 2024). Teachers should also introduce learners to spaced repetition tools, such as Quizlet or Anki, and guide them in scheduling reviews for optimal memory consolidation (Islam et al., 2025).

For Learners: Students are encouraged to extend their use of memorization strategies beyond the classroom. Personal techniques such as mnemonics, chunking, and word association are especially useful when paired with self-reflection. As Acosta Camacho (2024) notes, learners who connect vocabulary with personal memories or culturally significant imagery often demonstrate higher motivation and recall rates.

6.2. Leveraging Technology in Language Learning

For Teachers: Technology presents new opportunities for integrating memorization into language curricula. AI-supported applications provide customized feedback, allowing teachers to monitor student progress and adapt materials accordingly (Лощагин, 2024; Alisoy, 2025). These tools also enable flipped classroom models, where students engage in memorization tasks at home and apply vocabulary in interactive classroom activities.

For Learners: Digital platforms offer learners flexible, mobile access to vocabulary practice. Applications like Memrise and Duolingo combine spaced repetition algorithms with gamified elements that maintain learner engagement. These platforms also adapt to individual progress levels, making vocabulary review more targeted and efficient.

6.3. Contextual Learning for Better Retention

For Teachers: Vocabulary memorization should be embedded in communicative activities, not treated as a separate task. Role plays, debates, storytelling, and project-based learning allow students to use memorized vocabulary in real-world contexts. Islam et al. (2025) found that contextual application of vocabulary significantly improves both retention and fluency.

For Learners: Learners should be encouraged to create opportunities for authentic language use. Watching foreign-language media, participating in online language exchanges, or journaling in the target language allows students to activate stored vocabulary in meaningful ways (Acosta Camacho, 2024). These activities not only reinforce memorization but also improve confidence and spontaneous language use.



6.4. Encouraging Active Learning and Reflection

For Teachers: Metacognitive awareness can be fostered through guided reflection. Teachers can ask students to evaluate which strategies worked best for them and why. According to Natarajan and Pez (2024), when learners reflect on their memorization habits, they become more autonomous and strategic in their study practices.

For Learners: Keeping a strategy journal, logging study sessions, and noting recall patterns can help learners fine-tune their approach. If, for example, a student consistently forgets certain words, they might experiment with different techniques—such as visual mapping or contextual use—to reinforce learning.

6.5. Addressing Challenges and Personalizing Strategies

For Teachers: Not all students respond equally to the same strategies. Teachers should remain attentive to individual differences and adjust instruction accordingly. For weaker learners, more structured and frequent repetition may be necessary (Mammadova, 2024). For advanced students, abstract language tasks and problem-solving discussions can offer better cognitive engagement.

For Learners: Students should recognize that memorization is an evolving process. Strategies that worked at the beginner level may lose effectiveness over time. Learners need to be willing to adapt—shifting from rote memorization to context-based application and using digital tools to track progress and adjust review intervals (Taraskevičius, 2024).

7. Challenges and Criticisms

While memorization strategies are foundational in foreign language education, they are not without limitations. If misapplied or overly relied upon, these techniques may hinder deeper language development, create disengagement, or overlook learner diversity. This section discusses key challenges and critiques identified in the literature, offering a nuanced view of the role memorization plays in language learning.

7.1. Overreliance on Rote Learning

Rote learning, though effective for short-term recall, often promotes surface-level retention without enabling learners to apply vocabulary meaningfully. Majid (2024) observes that excessive reliance on repetition can result in students memorizing isolated words without understanding usage or context.

Islam et al. (2025) critique this tendency, noting that while rote memorization may help learners pass vocabulary quizzes, it does little to support communicative competence. When learners memorize lists without practicing in real-life scenarios, their speaking and listening fluency may stagnate.

7.2. Limited Transfer to Real-World Communication

A major critique of memorization strategies is their ineffectiveness in fostering spontaneous language use. Learners may retain vocabulary items but fail to apply them during actual communication tasks. This is particularly problematic in EFL settings where students often lack real exposure to the target language environment.



As Acosta Camacho (2024) explains, memorized language often remains passive unless students are prompted to activate it through discussion, interaction, or storytelling. Natarajan and Pez (2024) also emphasize that the gap between recognition and production remains a persistent issue when instruction centers solely on memorization.

7.3. Reduced Effectiveness for Advanced Learners

While memorization strategies are invaluable for beginners, their usefulness tends to diminish at higher proficiency levels. Advanced learners need more than vocabulary recall—they require critical thinking, idiomatic mastery, and pragmatic skills.

Majid (2024) notes that overuse of memorization tools at this level can become monotonous, failing to engage learners who are ready for more cognitively demanding tasks. These learners benefit more from activities that involve analysis, synthesis, and debate using target language structures.

7.4. Individual and Cultural Variability

Memorization success is also shaped by learning style preferences and cultural expectations. While some learners thrive with structured drills and repetition, others prefer dynamic, experiential methods like project-based or experiential learning (Acosta Camacho, 2024).

Standardizing memorization techniques without accounting for diversity risks alienating learners. Natarajan and Pez (2024) argue that teachers must consider sociocultural factors—such as identity, learning history, and language ideology—when choosing or recommending strategies. One-size-fits-all approaches are often ineffective and may disadvantage marginalized learners.

7.5. Overdependence on Technology

The rise of SRS and AI tools has undoubtedly transformed memorization, but overdependence on digital platforms can reduce active engagement. Learners may become passive recipients of spaced repetition schedules, neglecting interpersonal communication or creative language use.

Лощагин (2024) cautions that while AI enhances efficiency, it may also foster isolated study habits and reduce learners' exposure to collaborative, communicative activities. Islam et al. (2025) similarly note that excessive reliance on apps may lead to disengagement from meaningful, situational learning.

8. Conclusion

This narrative review has explored the essential role of memorization strategies in foreign language learning, synthesizing insights from cognitive science, pedagogy, and applied linguistics. The findings affirm that while memorization remains a critical component of language acquisition—especially in the early stages—it must be applied with nuance, flexibility, and pedagogical balance.

First, the review confirms that memorization supports foundational vocabulary development. Techniques such as spaced repetition, mnemonics, and visual mapping offer measurable benefits in terms of recall and retention (Majid, 2024; Taraskevičius, 2024; Islam et al., 2025). When used strategically, these methods enhance both short-term performance and long-term fluency.



Second, the importance of contextual and communicative application emerged as a recurring theme. Vocabulary memorized in isolation risks becoming inert unless reinforced through meaningful, real-world use (Acosta Camacho, 2024; Natarajan & Pez, 2024). Thus, integrating memorization with storytelling, debates, and collaborative activities ensures that vocabulary is not only remembered but actively employed.

Third, the review highlights the influence of learner-specific factors—such as age, proficiency, motivation, and learning style—on the success of memorization strategies. One-size-fits-all methods are insufficient. Teachers must adopt differentiated approaches and empower learners to reflect on, personalize, and adjust their memorization techniques.

Fourth, while technology-enhanced memorization offers powerful tools for efficiency and scalability, it must be balanced with human interaction and communicative practice. Over-reliance on digital tools can inadvertently reduce opportunities for authentic, spontaneous language use (Лощагин, 2024).

Ultimately, memorization should be reframed not as a mechanical act but as a cognitively rich, adaptive process—one that interacts dynamically with context, culture, and communication. Educators are encouraged to blend cognitive strategies with affective and sociocultural dimensions, guiding learners toward becoming autonomous, reflective, and confident language users.

When integrated within a broader framework of communicative language teaching, memorization strategies serve as a bridge—linking input and output, exposure and application, knowledge and fluency. By recognizing both their power and limitations, teachers and learners can make informed, effective use of these strategies in the lifelong journey of language learning.

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