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### MEMORIZATION IN EARLY LITERACY: A REFLECTIVE STUDY OF SPELLING BEE PRACTICES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This reflective case study explores how a spelling bee competition can transform the researcher's perception of memorization from a mechanical task into an engaging, meaningful experience. Conducted at private school running international curriculum in Makassar, the event involved preparatory and lower primary students aged five to eight, competing through written and oral rounds. Data were collected through classroom observation, teacher notes, and post-event reflections. The findings address the research objectives thematically. They reveal that memorization, when embedded in a playful and competitive format, supports not only cognitive development but also social interaction and emotional growth. The event fostered students' confidence, cooperation, and enthusiasm for learning English. Reflecting as both teacher and lecturer, the researcher argues that small-scale events like this merit scholarly attention, as they reveal the pedagogical value of joy, curiosity, and community participation in early language learning.

**Keywords:** memorization, reflective teaching, spelling bee, vocabulary learning, young learners

#### INTRODUCTION

Memorization remains a contested practice in early language education. While contemporary child-centred and communicative pedagogies often position memorization as outdated or overly mechanical, recent research suggests that structured repetition can play a meaningful role in early vocabulary and literacy development when embedded in supportive and engaging contexts (DeKeyser, 2020; Hulstijn, 2020). This tension raises an important pedagogical question: can memorization genuinely support young learners' vocabulary development, or does it merely encourage surface-level recall? Addressing this question is particularly relevant in multilingual classrooms, where learners' exposure to English varies widely and foundational literacy skills are still emerging.

Situated within this debate, the present reflective study examines memorization as it unfolds in practice through a spelling bee designed for kindergarten and lower primary students at an anonymous primary school in Makassar. Drawing on the teacher-as-researcher tradition, the study explores memorization not as an abstract instructional principle but as a lived classroom experience shaped by pedagogy, interaction, and learner response. The researcher's initial skepticism toward memorization - rooted in concerns about rote learning - served as the starting point for systematic reflection on how children rehearse, store, and retrieve vocabulary in a structured yet playful learning environment. Recent research on vocabulary retention in young learners underscores the value of structured repetition and retrieval practice, particularly when embedded in engaging classroom activities that balance form and meaning, contribute significantly to durable vocabulary learning in early primary contexts (Sahin & Yavuz, 2025; Kulsum, 2023).

In this study, memorization is conceptualized as intentional rehearsal involving repeated exposure to sounds, word forms, and spelling patterns, rather than mechanical repetition devoid of meaning. Early literacy refers to the development of foundational reading, spelling, and vocabulary skills typically acquired between the ages of four and eight. Research indicates that vocabulary instruction which attends explicitly to *both* sound structure and meaning enhances young children's vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and decoding outcomes, demonstrating that structured exposure supports deeper lexical learning (Brooks et al., 2025). Similarly, repeated and meaningful language exposure, such as informational read-alouds in kindergarten, is associated with stronger vocabulary development (Wang et al., 2025). Moreover, studies of orthographic facilitation show that integrating spelling forms with spoken vocabulary learning improves retention and word learning, reinforcing the value of repeated attention to form and meaning in early literacy (Wang et al., 2025)

The spelling bee was inspired by international models such as major organized spelling competitions, including national spelling bee events in Australia that engage primary and secondary school students in structured word-learning and spelling challenges designed to broaden vocabulary and literacy skills. Implemented in a linguistically diverse classroom, the activity involved students with markedly different language backgrounds: some children used English regularly at home, while others relied almost exclusively on Bahasa Indonesia. These uneven starting points presented both a pedagogical challenge and an opportunity to observe how structured memorization - supported by thematic word lists and instructional scaffolding - functioned across varying proficiency levels. Recent research underscores the need for vocabulary instruction to be adapted to learners' differing proficiency profiles, demonstrating that explicit scaffolding, flexible grouping, and targeted materials can help accommodate linguistic diversity and enhance vocabulary outcomes for young learners (Zeng, 2025). Consistent with findings from Indonesian EFL classrooms, explicit scaffolding and differentiated vocabulary input are crucial in addressing learners' diverse proficiency profiles (Sakina & Astuti, 2024; Kulsum et al., 2023).

Although research on memorization and vocabulary development in early literacy has expanded in recent years, studies that focus specifically on spelling bees tend to centre on older learners, most commonly in upper primary or secondary school contexts (Garton & Copland, 2018; Mawar & Anggreni, 2025). Empirical research examining spelling competitions involving very young learners, particularly in multilingual educational settings such as Indonesia - remains limited. Moreover, few studies adopt a

reflective practitioner or teacher-as-researcher perspective that foregrounds how teachers' beliefs about memorization and repetition evolve through classroom practice and systematic observation. This gap points to the need for research that connects theoretical perspectives on memorization with lived classroom experience and reflective inquiry, particularly in linguistically diverse early literacy contexts where learners' proficiency levels and language exposure vary widely (Zeng, 2025).

Responding to this gap, the present study is guided by three interconnected objectives, which are addressed thematically rather than as discrete, sequential questions. First, the study examines how memorization functions in practice within a spelling bee for early learners, focusing on how children rehearse, store, and retrieve vocabulary through repeated and structured engagement. Second, it explores how the teacher-researcher's beliefs and assumptions about memorization evolve through ongoing reflective engagement with classroom practice, observation, and interaction with learners. Third, it considers how the spelling bee contributes to early literacy development within a multilingual primary school context.

Addressing these objectives thematically allows the study to capture the dynamic interplay between learners' experiences and the teacher-researcher's evolving pedagogical understanding. In doing so, the study contributes to discussions on memorization in early language education in several ways. It reframes memorization as a pedagogical practice that can be meaningful, motivating, and socially embedded, rather than purely mechanical. It also sheds light on how young multilingual learners experience vocabulary learning within a collaborative yet competitive literacy event. Finally, by foregrounding a teacher-as-researcher perspective, the study demonstrates how reflective, classroom-based inquiry can challenge established assumptions about memorization and deepen understandings of early literacy pedagogy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Memorization in Young Learners' Language Development**

The role of memorization in young learners' language development has been widely debated within applied linguistics and early childhood education. In contemporary communicative and learner-centered pedagogies, memorization is often positioned as an outdated or teacher-centered practice, frequently criticized for encouraging surface-level learning rather than meaningful language use (Garton & Copland, 2018). From this perspective, memorization is typically associated with rote repetition detached from context, interaction, and learner agency - elements considered essential in child-centered language classrooms.

From a sociocultural perspective, the spelling bee in this study is not merely a test of what children already know, but a site of mediated learning situated within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept. Many of the target words are not yet fully internalized and lie just beyond what learners can produce independently. Through guided repetition, teacher prompts, peer modelling, collective rehearsal, and immediate feedback during the spelling bee, children are supported to perform at a higher level than they could manage on their own. In this sense, memorization functions as assisted performance, a core feature of ZPD-based learning.

Consistent with sociocultural theory, learning in this context unfolds first on the social plane before becoming internalized at the individual level. The spelling bee provides a shared social space in which children hear words spoken aloud, observe

peers' successes and struggles, receive instructional scaffolding, and engage in repeated, meaningful interaction around the same lexical items. Through participation in this collective activity, phonological patterns, spelling conventions, and vocabulary forms are co-constructed socially and gradually appropriated by individual learners. What appears as memorization on the surface thus represents a process of internalization through socially mediated participation rather than mechanical repetition.

Cognitive and pedagogical perspectives on young learners further suggest that memorization is particularly effective when integrated with engaging and creative classroom practices. Thornbury (2017) argued that repetition and memorization, when embedded in meaningful contexts such as play, performance, and presentation, stimulate both analytical processing and imaginative engagement. These activities allow learners to rehearse language forms while simultaneously attaching emotional relevance and personal meaning to them. Empirical research supports this claim: for example, a recent classroom study found that interactive teaching methods such as songs, games, and structured play, which incorporate repetition and multisensory interaction, significantly enhanced young learners' vocabulary recall and confidence compared with traditional instruction, indicating that engagement and creative practice reinforce retention and comprehension (Meisuri et al., 2025). Such integration aligns with research on young learners' cognitive development, which highlights the importance of enjoyment, repetition, and multisensory engagement in sustaining attention and promoting retention.

Empirical studies also indicate that repetition contributes not only to linguistic internalization but to affective outcomes such as motivation and confidence. Brown and Lee (2015) noted that when repetition is meaningful and purposeful, it supports learners' willingness to participate and reduces anxiety associated with language use. Recent classroom research with young learners found that interactive and repetitive activities such as songs, games, and structured play significantly enhanced not only vocabulary recall but also learners' confidence and motivation to engage in language tasks, indicating that repetition embedded in engaging practice fosters both cognitive and affective gains (Meisuri et al., 2025). Taken together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives suggest that memorization should not be viewed as inherently outdated, but rather evaluated in terms of how it is implemented, specifically, whether it is scaffolded, contextualized, and responsive to young learners' cognitive and emotional needs.

### **Sociocultural Influences on Literacy Practices in Private School Contexts**

Language learning does not occur in isolation from its social context, and literacy practices are shaped by broader sociocultural environments. In private urban school settings, English proficiency often functions as a form of social and cultural capital associated with academic success, social prestige, and future opportunities. Research in Indonesian educational contexts highlights that many parents view early English language learning as valuable for children's cognitive development, competitive advantage, and access to future educational and career pathways (Hasibuan & Pricilia, 2024). This parental emphasis reflects broader sociocultural pressures in urban contexts where English is seen not only as an academic skill but as a marker of global competence and upward mobility, shaping both school expectations and home literacy practices (Vicontie & Santosa, 2025). Within these environments, parents with professional or higher educational backgrounds are more likely to invest in English learning resources

and activities, reinforcing English proficiency as symbolic capital that supports students' social positioning within and beyond the school context.

Such sociocultural dynamics shape children's exposure to English beyond the classroom, as families play a significant role in extending language learning into the home environment. Many learners receive additional support through structured practice at home, parental involvement in learning activities, or access to supplementary resources, all of which have been shown to contribute positively to children's confidence, motivation, and readiness to engage in performance-oriented language tasks. Recent research in Indonesian and multilingual contexts highlights that active parental involvement in children's English learning - including encouragement, shared activities, and at-home support - is associated with higher motivation and self-efficacy in young learners (Ningrum et al., 2025; Sumanti & Muljani, 2023). These findings reinforce the view that language development is deeply embedded in social and familial contexts that regulate access to learning opportunities and shape learners' attitudes toward English, emphasizing the importance of family and institutional values in shaping early literacy outcomes (Alias et al., 2024).

Within supportive school cultures that celebrate linguistic achievement, memorization and repetition take on meanings that extend beyond rote learning. When embedded in environments that recognize effort, performance, and progress, memorization becomes a socially mediated practice that contributes to learners' identity construction as competent language users. Performance-based activities such as spelling bees operate as mediational spaces where cognitive processes - such as recalling spelling patterns - intersect with affective and social dimensions, including encouragement, peer recognition, and a sense of belonging. Recent research on classroom competitions and collaborative language tasks shows that competitive and performance-oriented activities can enhance learners' motivation and self-efficacy, even as they highlight the emotional and social processes that shape learners' engagement and confidence in language tasks (Tipán & Argudo-Serrano, 2025). This suggests that memorization can become pedagogically meaningful when situated within environments that value language learning as part of students' academic and social identity.

### **Debates and Empirical Evidence on the Pedagogical Value of Memorization**

Despite growing recognition of its potential benefits, memorization remains a contested practice in language education. Critics argue that rote learning conducted without meaningful context may lead to superficial knowledge, enabling learners to recall language forms without being able to use them communicatively (Brown & Lee, 2015). From this viewpoint, memorization is often linked to passive learning, limited transfer, and reduced learner creativity.

In contrast, a substantial body of research challenges this dichotomous framing of memorization versus communication. Oxford (2017) contended that repetition plays a crucial role in developing lexical storage, automaticity, and rapid retrieval, which are key cognitive processes underlying fluent language use. Rather than undermining communicative competence, memorization can provide the linguistic resources that enable learners, particularly young learners, to participate more confidently in meaningful interaction.

Research in early literacy further supports the pedagogical value of memorization. Lightbown and Spada (2021) highlighted that repeated exposure to language forms helps children internalize letter-sound correspondences, thereby strengthening

decoding, spelling, and early writing skills. Similarly, Thornbury (2017) emphasized that orthographic memory develops through frequent, playful engagement with written language, underscoring the role of repetition in pattern recognition rather than mere recall.

Studies focusing on spelling bees offer additional insights into how memorization operates in practice within language classrooms. Earlier research by Garton and Copland (2018) reported that spelling bee activities cultivate not only spelling accuracy but also listening precision, concentration, and rapid linguistic processing. More recent empirical evidence echoes and extends these findings: classroom studies of spelling bee implementations have demonstrated significant gains in vocabulary mastery, increased active engagement, and positive affective responses among young learners, with students showing higher motivation and confidence when participating in structured spelling bee activities compared with traditional instruction (Mawar & Anggreni, 2025; Sardiansa et al., 2025). When conducted in supportive, low-anxiety environments that emphasize interaction and encouragement, such activities can transform memorization from a mechanical exercise into an empowering learning experience that integrates cognitive rehearsal with emotional and social engagement. In line with Pinter's (2017) argument that young learners benefit most when structured repetition is accompanied by clear scaffolding and opportunities for success, these conditions position memorization as a tool for exploration and growth, fostering self-discipline, curiosity, and sustained engagement with language.

## METHOD

This study adopts a reflective qualitative design grounded in the teacher-as-researcher tradition, in which classroom practices are examined systematically to generate pedagogical insight (Borg, 2015; Farrell, 2022). Reflection is treated not as personal narrative but as an analytical process through which teaching decisions, learner responses, and contextual factors are interpreted. As both classroom teacher and spelling bee coordinator, the researcher assumed the role of a participant-observer, enabling close engagement with instructional planning, learner behaviour, and interactional dynamics during the event, while maintaining reflective distance through field notes and analytic memos.

Rather than measuring learning outcomes through test scores, the study focuses on how memorization functioned in practice, particularly in relation to student engagement, confidence, and early literacy behaviours. This orientation aligns with qualitative research principles that prioritize meaning-making, process, and context over quantification (Harmer, 2015).

The study was conducted at an urban private school implementing a bilingual curriculum that integrates national and international standards. The institution serves a multilingual student population in which English and Bahasa Indonesia are used flexibly in daily interactions. The research site was selected because the researcher had taught English at the school for over five years, providing sustained familiarity with the English curriculum, school culture, and the organization of English-related academic events.

The spelling bee was conducted during the odd semester of the 2021/2022 academic year. Although the classroom events occurred several years prior to the study, they were systematically documented at the time and revisited through a theory-informed reflective lens, allowing for deeper analytical distance and conceptual clarity.

Participants consisted of 48 students aged between 5 and 8 years, drawn from four classes: Preparatory A, Preparatory B, Grade 1, and Grade 2. Participant selection followed a purposive sampling approach based on pedagogical readiness and existing class structures. At the preschool level, participation was limited to pupils who demonstrated sufficient readiness to remain seated, follow instructions, and engage in a spelling task. At the primary level, participants were drawn from two intact classes that were enrolled at the time of the spelling bee in 2019.

Students' linguistic backgrounds varied considerably, ranging from English-dominant households to homes where Bahasa Indonesia was the primary language. This diversity provided a natural context for examining how memorization operated across differing levels of exposure and readiness (Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

The event unfolded across three stages: preparation, written preliminary rounds, and oral performance rounds. Word lists were distributed in advance and organized thematically to ensure scaffolding and developmental appropriateness. The competition structure was designed to balance challenge and emotional safety, allowing students to progress gradually from written recall to public oral spelling.

Data were generated through reflective observation, informal interaction, and event documentation, consistent with a qualitative, classroom-based research approach. Throughout the preparation and competition stages, the researcher maintained systematic field notes capturing student participation, rehearsal strategies, affective responses, and interactional patterns during spelling activities. These observational and interactional data provided evidence of how children rehearsed, retrieved, and performed memorized vocabulary within authentic classroom contexts. Focusing on real-time interaction and learner behaviour allowed memorization to be examined as a socially mediated process rather than a decontextualized outcome.

A reflective journal was maintained throughout the preparation and competition phases to document the researcher's evolving pedagogical beliefs, instructional decisions, and responses to student performance. Journal entries were written regularly following planning sessions, rehearsals, and spelling bee events, allowing reflection to be captured longitudinally. In addition, informal conversations with students, teachers, and parents were selectively noted when they related to attitudes toward memorization, competition, and confidence. Student artifacts, including written spelling sheets and records of oral performance, were collected from all participating learners across stages to trace patterns of accuracy, error, and improvement. Together, these data sources enabled triangulation across observation, reflection, interaction, and artifacts, strengthening the credibility of the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Given the involvement of young learners, ethical considerations were carefully observed. The school is anonymous. No identifying student information was included, and the analysis focused on group patterns rather than individual evaluation. Parental consent for participation and documentation was obtained through established school procedures. All data were handled confidentially and used solely for academic and professional purposes.

The data were analysed using a thematic approach, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge across multiple sources of qualitative evidence. Analysis was conducted iteratively, with observational data, interactional evidence, reflective journal entries, informal conversations, and student artifacts examined across the preparation and competition stages of the spelling bee. Three overarching themes guided the analysis. Theme 1 examined how memorization functioned in practice by analysing

observational and interactional evidence from students, including rehearsal strategies, peer modelling, affective responses, and performance behaviours. Theme 2 focused on the researcher's shifting beliefs about memorization, drawing on reflective journal entries to trace changes in pedagogical assumptions, instructional decisions, and interpretations of student learning. Theme 3 explored how participation in the spelling bee influenced early literacy development, using evidence from student artifacts and performance outcomes to examine patterns of vocabulary acquisition, spelling accuracy, and emerging confidence in literacy-related tasks.

**Table 1. Overview of thematic data analysis**

Theme	Analytical Focus	Primary Data Sources	Key Analytical Emphases
Theme 1: Memorization in Practice	How memorization functioned during the spelling bee	Observational data; interactional evidence; field notes	Rehearsal strategies, guided repetition, peer modelling, affective responses (e.g. confidence, anxiety), and real-time performance behaviours
Theme 2: Shifting Teacher Beliefs	Development of the researcher's beliefs about memorization	Reflective journal entries; analytic memos	Changes in pedagogical assumptions, instructional decisions, and interpretations of memorization as a learning process
Theme 3: Early Literacy Development	Influence of the spelling bee on early literacy outcomes	Student artifacts; spelling sheets; oral performance records	Vocabulary acquisition, spelling accuracy, error patterns, improvement over stages, and emerging confidence in literacy tasks

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### How Memorization Functions Within a Spelling Bee for Early Learners

This study found that memorization functioned as a scaffolded, multimodal, and socially supported process throughout the spelling bee, rather than as isolated rote recall. Drawing on observational field notes and interactional records, memorization during both preparation and performance stages was enacted through repetition, phonological rehearsal, visual pattern recognition, and progressive retrieval. These processes enabled young learners to internalize spelling forms while maintaining high levels of engagement and confidence, as consistently noted in classroom observations and reflective journal entries.

During the preparation phase, memorization was primarily constructed through structured repetition embedded in routine classroom practices, including weekly spelling tests, guided oral rehearsal, and peer-based practice. Observational data and student artifacts (written spelling sheets) showed that students repeatedly encountered target words through listening, speaking, and writing, allowing phonological and orthographic representations to be consolidated more securely. Reflective field notes indicated that repetition was not experienced as monotonous; rather, it was perceived as purposeful because it was consistently linked to an

upcoming public performance. This finding is consistent with more recent research suggesting that repetition is most effective when it is meaning-oriented, multimodal, and goal-directed (DeKeyser, 2020; Webb et al., 2023). In this respect, the results also resonate with earlier work by Tuan and Doan (2010), who argued that repeated exposure combined with guidance strengthens both accuracy and learner confidence.

From a sociocognitive perspective, memorization during the spelling bee functioned within students' Zones of Proximal Development. Classroom observations and interactional evidence showed that words were carefully sequenced according to students' developmental levels, ensuring that tasks were challenging yet achievable with teacher support. This design prevented cognitive overload while encouraging incremental progress, reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on learning through assisted performance and more recent sociocultural interpretations of scaffolded language development (Infante & Poehner, 2021; Lantolf et al., 2020). For example, observational notes documented that preparatory students relied heavily on modeled pronunciation and rhythmic rehearsal, while Grade 1 and Grade 2 students demonstrated increasing independence by recalling spelling patterns with minimal prompting. Such gradual shifts from other-regulation to self-regulation align with contemporary research on dynamic scaffolding in early language classrooms (Van de Pol et al., 2019). These patterns also support Cameron's (2001) argument that patterned repetition is central to early literacy development, particularly for young EFL learners, and reaffirm recent claims that repetition becomes developmentally productive when embedded in interaction rather than isolated drill.

Memorization became more visible during the written preliminary round, where students were required to retrieve stored word forms without contextual support. Event documentation and student spelling sheets showed that each word was read aloud three times and written within a fixed time limit. Analysis of these artifacts revealed that memorization operated primarily through lexical recall and sound-letter mapping rather than meaning-based inference. In line with Nation's (2013) description of form-focused learning, students relied on previously rehearsed phonological representations to reconstruct accurate spellings, a process that recent research has shown to be critical in early literacy tasks involving decontextualized word recognition (DeKeyser, 2020; Webb et al., 2023). Higher accuracy rates among students who had participated consistently in preparatory repetition cycles were evident in artifact analysis, indicating that memorization played a foundational role in decoding and spelling accuracy, particularly when rehearsal was distributed and systematic (Ke et al., 2023; Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

In the oral spelling rounds, memorization functioned differently, requiring real-time retrieval under mild performance pressure. Observational data and performance records indicated that students spelled words aloud while scores were displayed publicly, increasing both cognitive and affective demands. However, reflective journal entries noted that the gradual progression from written recall to oral production allowed students to adapt successfully. This progression reflects Bruner's (1996) notion of increasing task complexity to promote learner independence. Importantly, field notes documented that a supportive classroom

climate mitigated anxiety: students received encouragement from teachers and peers, and errors were treated as part of the learning process. This emotional safety aligns with Oxford's (2017) assertion that positive affect enhances memory retrieval and performance.

Developmental differences further illustrated how memorization functioned across age groups. Observational records and artifact analysis showed that preparatory students (ages 5–6), whose reading levels ranged from B to G on Kids A–Z, relied more heavily on auditory repetition and visual memory. In contrast, Grade 1 and Grade 2 students demonstrated stronger orthographic awareness and greater independence in retrieving spelling patterns. These differences confirm Lightbown and Spada's (2021) claim that literacy development is shaped by both the quantity and quality of exposure. Evidence from weekly spelling tests and classroom routines further indicated that spaced repetition strengthened long-term retention, supporting Oxford's (2017) view of repetition as a key mechanism for durable vocabulary learning.

Several critical moments highlighted the interaction between memorization, motivation, and confidence. Performance records and observational notes documented that a Grade 1 student ranked third among older peers, suggesting that strong self-belief can amplify memory performance. Gender-based patterns also emerged in the performance data, with boys outperforming girls at higher levels and girls demonstrating stronger performance at preparatory stages. While existing literature rarely addresses gender in relation to memorization, these observations suggest that developmental readiness and motivational factors may influence how memorization is enacted across age groups, offering a potential contribution beyond current scholarship.

Finally, memorization was deeply shaped by the sociocultural environment of the school. Observational data, informal conversations, and reflective journal entries indicated that the spelling bee fostered cooperation, peer encouragement, and shared excitement, transforming memorization into a collective achievement rather than an individual burden. Students celebrated each round together, parents expressed enthusiasm in informal interactions, and several requested that the event be held more frequently. These responses reinforce So's (2007) argument that literacy practices are socially mediated and emotionally grounded. Contemporary research further suggests that classroom literacy practices are co-constructed through shared interactions and collaborative support, which strengthen learners' engagement, sense of belonging, and participation in joint meaning-making. In this context, memorization functioned not only as a cognitive strategy but also as a socially meaningful literacy practice that strengthened learners' identities as capable English users, consistent with sociocultural perspectives that view literacy as embedded in social contexts and collective participation rather than isolated individual effort.

### **How Teacher-Researcher Beliefs about Memorization Evolve**

Previous research provides an important context for understanding how teachers' beliefs about memorization evolve through classroom experience. Garton and Copland (2018) reported that many early-years teachers initially perceive memorization as outdated or incompatible with child-centered pedagogy, but later

revise these views after observing how structured repetition supports confidence and vocabulary retention. Similarly, Pinter (2017) showed that in multilingual classrooms, teachers increasingly regard memorization as purposeful when it is embedded within meaningful interaction and supported by clear scaffolding. More recent studies further indicated that when repetition is paired with enjoyable, collaborative activities, teachers tend to reassess memorization positively as they witness growth in learner autonomy and engagement (Lee & Lin, 2023). These findings provided an interpretive lens for examining the belief changes documented in the researcher's reflective journal and classroom observations during the spelling bee project.

This study directly addresses Objective 2 by tracing how the researcher's beliefs about memorization shifted throughout the spelling bee project, as recorded in the reflective journal. At the outset, journal entries revealed that memorization was viewed as a narrow and mechanical practice, often criticized for encouraging surface-level learning and passive recall. This skepticism mirrored dominant critiques in the literature that associate memorization with rote learning and limited communicative value (Garton & Copland, 2018). At this stage, the researcher questioned whether a spelling bee could meaningfully contribute to young learners' language development beyond short-term recall, a concern repeatedly noted in early planning reflections.

However, systematic classroom observations during the preparation and execution of the spelling bee prompted a clear shift in this belief. Observational notes documented that, as the event progressed, students demonstrated not only increased spelling accuracy, but also clearer pronunciation, stronger recall under performance conditions, and growing confidence when attempting unfamiliar words. Analysis of student artifacts, including weekly spelling sheets and performance records, showed consistent improvement across practice sessions and competition rounds, suggesting learning that extended beyond momentary memorization. These patterns, triangulated with reflective journal entries, led the researcher to reconsider memorization as a supportive cognitive process rather than a restrictive one. This belief change aligns with Nation's (2013) argument that repeated retrieval and rehearsal, when carefully designed, play a central role in early vocabulary development.

Further evidence reinforcing this belief shift emerged from interactional data gathered through informal conversations and classroom interaction. Field notes recorded instances where students asked about word meanings, connected spelling items to classroom stories, and expressed excitement upon recognizing memorized words in new contexts. These behaviors, observed consistently during lessons and noted in the reflective journal, indicated that memorization functioned as an entry point for deeper language engagement rather than an end goal. This finding supports So's (2007) sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes that learning becomes meaningful when linguistic forms are integrated with social use and shared interaction. For the researcher, these interactional moments were pivotal in reframing memorization as a bridge toward communicative competence.

The emotional and social dimensions of the spelling bee further shaped the researcher's evolving stance, as documented through observational notes and post-

event reflections. The structured routines of the competition appeared to create a calm and predictable environment, enabling students to regulate anxiety and remain focused during performance. Observations showed that even younger or typically reserved learners participated confidently, an insight reinforced by informal conversations with students who reported feeling “brave” or “ready” during the event. These data suggest that structured memorization tasks can foster emotional security rather than pressure. This interpretation aligns with Pinter’s (2017) assertion that predictable literacy practices support self-regulation in young learners, as well as Bruner’s (1996) claim that emotional safety enhances cognitive performance.

The broader school context also influenced the researcher’s reflections, particularly through informal conversations with parents and colleagues. Notes from these conversations indicated strong parental support, positive feedback about children’s confidence, and students’ requests for future spelling bee events. These responses, recorded alongside observational data, reinforced the perception that memorization-based activities were both motivating and meaningful within this institutional setting. Such findings highlight how school culture and community expectations amplify the pedagogical value of memorization, echoing sociocultural views of literacy as a shared and identity-forming practice (So, 2007).

In conclusion, triangulated data from reflective journals, classroom observations, student artifacts, and informal conversations revealed a clear shift in the researcher’s beliefs—from viewing memorization as a mechanical and limited strategy to understanding it as a dynamic, scaffolded, and socially embedded learning tool. When integrated with meaningful tasks, emotional support, and clear instructional design, memorization contributed to vocabulary retention, learner confidence, emotional resilience, and positive language identity. This conclusion aligns with Thornbury (2017) and Oxford (2017), who argued that repetition becomes transformative when connected to enjoyment, motivation, and purposeful language use. The researcher’s experience therefore challenges reductive views of memorization and affirms its pedagogical potential in early language learning contexts.

### **How a Spelling Bee Contributes to Early Literacy Development in a Multilingual Context**

This study found that the spelling bee contributed to early literacy development in a multilingual context in four interconnected ways: strengthening phonological awareness, reinforcing orthographic knowledge, supporting vocabulary development, and fostering positive affect toward English literacy. Analysis of classroom observations, student artifacts, and reflective journal entries indicated that, rather than functioning solely as a competitive activity, the spelling bee operated as a structured literacy event that integrated sound, print, memory, and social interaction.

First, the spelling bee supported phonological awareness and sound-symbol correspondence. Classroom observation notes documented that during preparation and competition stages, students repeatedly heard target words pronounced clearly, segmented phonemes aloud, and matched sounds to written forms on spelling sheets. Reflective journal entries further noted that learners - particularly those from

non-English-speaking homes - became increasingly accurate in identifying initial and final sounds. This repeated exposure appeared to refine decoding skills and auditory discrimination, a pattern consistently observed across practice sessions. These findings align with Lightbown and Spada's (2021) assertion that repeated sound-letter exposure is crucial for multilingual learners, and with Cameron's (2001) argument that early literacy develops through integrated engagement with sound, print, and interaction.

Second, the event strengthened orthographic memory and retrieval accuracy. Analysis of student artifacts, including weekly spelling worksheets and written preliminary-round responses, showed a gradual reduction in letter omissions and reversals over time. Observational data also indicated that students retrieved spellings more quickly and confidently during oral rounds, suggesting increased automaticity. Reflective journal entries noted that several learners who initially relied on visual prompts were later able to spell words independently, indicating consolidation of orthographic knowledge. This evidence supports Nation's (2013) claim that repeated encounters with vocabulary enhance form-meaning mapping, as well as Sulistyono's (2016) findings that structured spelling activities support decoding development even when English exposure at home is limited.

Third, the spelling bee contributed to vocabulary development beyond surface memorization. Interactional evidence from classroom observations and informal conversations showed that students frequently asked about word meanings during practice sessions, attempted to incorporate newly memorized words into classroom talk, and expressed excitement when recognizing these words in stories or instructional materials. These moments were recorded in both field notes and reflective journal entries, indicating that memorization functioned as a foundation for deeper lexical engagement rather than an endpoint. This pattern reflects Bruner's (1996) spiral curriculum, in which learners revisit language items at increasing levels of complexity, and supports Hornberger and Early's (2012) view of literacy events as socially situated spaces where language use expands through interaction.

Fourth, the spelling bee fostered affective readiness and behavioural regulation, both of which are critical components of early literacy development in multilingual contexts. Observational notes documented that the predictable structure of the event, combined with supportive teacher scaffolding, reduced performance anxiety and encouraged participation. Students were observed waiting for turns, listening attentively to peers, and demonstrating increased confidence during oral spelling rounds. Informal conversations with students revealed feelings of pride and enjoyment, particularly among typically reserved learners. These findings align with Pinter's (2017) argument that literacy development is strengthened when learners' identities and confidence are affirmed, as well as emphasis on emotional security in young learner classrooms.

Importantly, the multilingual school context amplified these outcomes. Reflective journal entries and informal conversations with teachers and parents indicated that, although students navigated multiple languages daily, the spelling bee created a shared English literacy space that was purposeful, celebratory, and socially meaningful. Parents reported increased enthusiasm for English practice at home, while students requested similar activities in the future. This supports

Oxford's (2017) continua of biliteracy, which highlight the value of structured engagement with language forms across contexts. In this setting, the spelling bee functioned as a mediating literacy practice where cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions intersected.

Overall, triangulated data from classroom observations, student artifacts, reflective journals, and informal conversations demonstrate that the spelling bee contributed substantially to early literacy development by integrating memorization with decoding, vocabulary growth, emotional engagement, and social participation. In a multilingual setting, such structured literacy events provide powerful opportunities for young learners to develop foundational English literacy skills while building confidence and positive learner identities.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that memorization, when intentionally designed and socially supported, can function as a meaningful pedagogical tool in early literacy development rather than a mechanical learning practice. Within the spelling bee context, memorization was experienced as an engaging and purposeful challenge that fostered motivation, confidence, and a sense of achievement among young learners. The findings address the study's objectives by illustrating how memorization operated in practice, how teacher beliefs evolved through reflective engagement, and how early literacy was supported in a multilingual primary school context.

With regard to the instructional process, memorization emerged as a structured yet flexible activity involving repeated exposure, phonological rehearsal, visual recognition, and staged retrieval. The gradual increase in task difficulty promoted self-regulation and strategic learning, enabling learners to manage preparation and categorize lexical difficulty independently. These outcomes indicate that scaffolded memorization can support cognitive development without overwhelming learners. At the same time, reflective observation of learners' performance led to a shift in the researcher's beliefs, repositioning memorization as a catalyst for linguistic precision, emotional resilience, and learner confidence rather than an outdated pedagogical approach.

Finally, the spelling bee contributed to early literacy development across cognitive, social, and affective dimensions. Learners strengthened phonological awareness, orthographic memory, and vocabulary retention, while the event fostered peer interaction, family involvement, and positive emotional engagement. By offering empirical insight into spelling bees involving very young learners, this study extends existing discussions on memorization and highlights the pedagogical value of small-scale, contextually grounded literacy activities. Pedagogically, the findings encourage educators to integrate memorization with play, creativity, and learner autonomy, while future research may explore similar practices across diverse educational settings and learner populations.

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