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**A Phenomenographic Investigation into the Students'  
Conceptions of and Approaches to Studying  
Linguistics: The Case of 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Students in the  
Department of English at the University of Algiers 2**

**A thesis submitted to the Department of English- Faculty of Foreign Languages-  
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'Doctorate' in English Linguistics and Didactics**

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## **DECLARATION**

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## **DEDICATION**

**This work is dedicated to:**

**The memory of my father BEZARI Abdel Kader who always believed in me**

**To the memory of my father in law MAARADJI Abdel Kader**

**To my mother who prayed so hard for this moment**

**To my sisters and brothers who have never hesitated in giving me all the  
needed support**

**To my husband for his encouragements**

**And to my two lovely daughters**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present study is a phenomenographic investigation into the students' experience of studying Linguistics. It aimed at investigating first the students' prior-conception and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics; second, the students' experience of studying based on linguistic text-based tasks, and third, the nature of Linguistics study emerging from the students' experience of learning in the context of the course of Linguistics. The study involved the participation of forty undergraduate students, all enrolled in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the Department of English of the University of Algiers 2, Abukacem Saad Allah.

This piece of research draws from phenomenography in designing, analyzing and interpreting the data. The data for this study were collected were essentially qualitative as it derived from qualitative phenomenographic research instruments. The collection of data went through two stages: in the first stage (Stage 1) of the study, the purpose was to collect data about the students' prior-conceptions of and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics. It involved the use of a semi-structured interview, an open-ended question, and a questionnaire. The second stage of the study (Stage 2) on the other hand targeted the text-based experience of studying Linguistics. It involved collecting data during a classroom study, using text-based reading and writing tasks, and after the classroom, using a stimulated-recall interview.

The findings of both stages of this research were organized in outcome spaces, which included all the categories of description hierarchically organized from the least to the most complex one. They revealed that the prior-experience of the studying Linguistics varied between the lower-level and more the higher study conceptions and approaches. At the lower-level are conceptions of Linguistics as accumulation of unrelated pieces linguistic information with the aim of reproducing to meet assessment needs. The adopted approach was a surface one implying the use of retention and memorization as the main learning strategies. The underling intention is to obtain the pass grade. At the higher level,

the students revealed a more meaningful learning experience where the students are actively seeking meaning and reflecting over the linguistic knowledge. Their approach was deep and cohesive where the dominant strategy was that of relating various pieces of information with the intention to achieve a holistic understanding of the received knowledge during the Course of Linguistics. A strong correlation was also found between the students' conceptions, approaches and the learning outcomes.

**Key words:** *Experience of learning, learning conceptions, Learning approaches, Linguistics, Phenomenography, Undergraduate students, Text-based learning experience*

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- **ASI:** Approaches to Studying Inventory
- **ASSIST:** Approaches to Studying Skills Inventory
- **Interviewer:** Inter
- **Stage 1/ Stage 2:** Sge1 / Sge2
- **Student1/2/... :** S1/S2/...

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table 1.1</b>	First- and Second Order Perspectives on the Same Phenomenon, Taken from Daniel et al (2016	52
<b>Table 3.1</b>	Analyzing the Participants' Verbal and Written Data into Themes and Categories	122
<b>Table 3.2</b>	Transcription Protocol	122
<b>Table 3.3</b>	The Outcome Space for the Prior-Conceptions of the Study of Linguistics	145/146
<b>Table 3.4</b>	The Outcome Space for the Students' Prior-approaches to Studying Linguistics	162-163
<b>Table 3.7</b>	Conceptions of Learning Items According to the Surface and Deep	165
<b>Table 3.6</b>	Item Means for the Conceptions of Learning dimensions	166
<b>Table 3.7</b>	Item means for Conceptions of Learning as Transmission of Knowledge	166
<b>Table 3.8</b>	Item Means for Conceptions of Learning as Personal Understanding	171
<b>Table 3.9</b>	Summary of the means and standard deviation for deep approach	172
<b>Table 3.10</b>	Summary of the Means and Standard Deviation for Strategic Approach	172
<b>Table 3.11</b>	Summary of the Means and Standard Deviation for Surface Approach	173
<b>Table 3.12</b>	Summary of the Means for Learning Approaches	173
<b>Table 3.13</b>	Percentages for Items Related to the Deep Dimension	174
<b>Table 3.14</b>	Percentages for Strategic Items	174
<b>Table 3.15</b>	Percentages for item related to the surface approach	176



<b>Table 3.16</b>	Mean averages for Section B of the Questionnaire	176/177
<b>Table 3.16</b>	Item Means for the Conceptions of Teaching Dimensions	179
<b>Table 3.17</b>	Item Means for Conceptions of Teaching as Encouraging Personal Understanding	180
<b>Table 4.1</b>	The Students' Participation in the Classroom Study by Subject	184
<b>Table 4.2</b>	Overview of the Subjects Participation in Stage 2	184
<b>Table 4.3</b>	Number of the summaries and percentages providing purpose statement	193
<b>Table 4.4</b>	The Summaries' Purpose Statements for both Texts by Students	194
<b>Table 4.5</b>	The Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics	244
<b>Table 4.6</b>	The Outcome Space for the Students' Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics	245
<b>Table 4.7</b>	The allocation of students into categories of description	246
<b>Table 5.1</b>	Levels and Features of the Study Conceptions in the Prior-experience of Studying Linguistics	272
<b>Table 5.2</b>	Levels and Features of Prior-Approaches to studying Linguistics	273
<b>Table 5.3</b>	Prior-experience of Studying Linguistics	276
<b>Table 5.4</b>	Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics	289

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Figure1.1</b>	Presage- Process- Product Model of Student Learning (taken from Prosser and Trigwell, 1999: 16)	50
<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Data Collection Tools	67
<b>Figure 2.2</b>	Theoretical Framework for the Study Based Prosser and Trigwell Model for the Learning Experience Research (1999)	103
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Framework for the Analysis of Classroom Study Data	184
<b>Figure4.1</b>	Teaching Linguistics from a Phenomenographic Social-Constructivist Perspective	306
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	Relationship between the three Worlds of Teaching, Research and Learning, based on Light and Cox's Model (2001: 35)	309

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Declaration</b> .....	i
<b>Dedication</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Abstract</b> .....	iv
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	vii
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	viii
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	ix
<b>Contents</b> .....	x

### **General Introduction**

1- Background of the Research .....	1
2- Statement of the Problem.....	4
3- Objectives of the Study and Research Questions:.....	8
4- Motivation for the Study.....	10
5- Significance of the Study.....	12
6- Definition of the Key Terms .....	14
7- Limitations of the Study .....	16
8- Structure of the Thesis .....	17

### **Chapter One:**

#### **Review of the Literature**

Introduction.....	20
1.1- Research into Students' Learning.....	20
1.1.1- Psychological Vs Educational Students Learning Research .....	21
1.1.2- Students' Experience of Learning.....	22
1.1.3- Research into the Students' Experience of Learning in Undergraduate Education.....	26

1.2- Concepts Describing the Students' Experience of Learning.....	30
1.2.1- Conceptions of Learning.....	31
1.2.2- Approaches to Learning.....	36
1.2.3- The Interrelationships between Conceptions, Approaches, and Orientations to Learning.....	40
1.3- Students' Experience of Learning Research across Cultures and Disciplines .....	41
1.4- Issues Emerging from Research on Students' Experience of Learning.....	44
1.5- Phenomenography .....	45
1.5.1- Phenomenography as a Non-Dualistic Research Perspective.....	46
1.5.2- Philosophical Underpinnings of Phenomenography .....	48
1.5.3- Investigating Student Learning from a Phenomenographic Research Perspective .....	49
Summary and conclusion.....	54

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Research Design and Procedure**

Introduction .....	56
2.1- Rationale and Research Questions .....	56
2.2- Sampling and Setting.....	61
2.3- Linguistics Course.....	62
2.4- Research Methodology .....	63
2.5- Data Collection Instruments .....	67
2.5.1- Data Collection Instruments Used in Sge 1 of the Study.....	67
2.5.1.1- Open-Ended Question .....	68
2.5.1.2- Semi-Structured Interview.....	69
2.5.1.3- Questionnaire .....	76
2.5.2- Data Collection Instruments Used in Sge 2 of the Study.....	86
2.5.2.1- Teaching Materials.....	88

2.5.2.2- Teaching Procedure.....	93
2.5.2.3- Texts Summaries .....	95
2.5.4- Stimulated-Recall Interview .....	97
2.6- Data Collection Procedure.....	102
2.7- Method of Data Analysis.....	103
2.8- Pilot Study .....	107
2.8.1- Semi-structured interviews .....	108
2.8.1.1-Changes made to the semi-structured interview used in Sge 1 .....	109
2.8.1.2-Changes made to the semi-structured interview used in Sge 2 .....	110
2.8.2- Open-Ended Question .....	111
2.8.3- Questionnaire .....	112
2.8.4- The Classroom Study.....	113
2.9-Validity and Reliability Issues.....	113
2.9.1- Validity .....	114
2.9.2- Reliability .....	115
Conclusion.....	116

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **Presentation and Analysis of Data of Stage one Findings**

Introduction.....	117
3.1-Method of Data Analysis.....	117
3.1.1-Data Analysis Procedure.....	118
3.1.2- Forming the Categories of Description.....	122
3.2- Analysis of the Open-Ended Question: Categories of Description of the Students' Prior-Conceptions .....	123
3.2.1- Category A: Linguistics is the Historical and Philosophical Study of Language .....	124

3.2.2- Category B: Linguistics as the Acquisition and Accumulation of Knowledge about the English Language .....	131
3.2.3- Category C: Linguistics as Understanding Practical Knowledge and Analyzing Languages.....	136
3.2.4- Category D: Linguistics as Critically Reflecting about Languages...	140
3.2.5- The Outcome Space for the Prior-Conceptions of Studying Linguistics .....	144
3.3- Analysis of the Interviews: Categories of Description of the Prior-Approaches to the Study of Linguistics.....	146
3.3.1- Category A: Memorizing Isolated Pieces of Information with the Intention to Reproduce them in any Future Assessment .....	147
3.3.2- Category B: Understanding and Memorizing Information with the Intention to Prepare for a future assessment.....	153
3.3.3- Category C: Understanding and Relating Pieces of Information with the Intention to have Holistic Understanding .....	157
3.3.4 The Outcome Space for the Students' Prior-approaches to Studying Linguistics: .....	161
3.4–Presentation and Analysis of the Questionnaire .....	163
3.4.1- Method of Analysis.....	163
3.4.2- Analysis of Section A: Conceptions of Learning .....	165
3.4.3- Analysis of Section B: Approaches to Learning.....	169
3.4.4- Analysis of Section C: Conceptions of teaching .....	178
Conclusion .....	181

**Chapter Four:**  
**Presentation and Analysis of Data of Stage Two Findings**

Introduction.....	183
4.1- Method of Data Analysis.....	183
4.2- Presentation and Analysis of the Students' Learning Conceptions and Approaches based on the Text-Based Experience of Studying Linguistics .....	188
4.2.1- Students' Text-Based Experience of Studying Linguistics: Analysis of the Summaries and Interviews.....	192
4.2.2.1- Variation in the Quality of the Summaries: Analysis of the Summaries.....	198
4.2.2.2- Variation in the Students' Attention: Categories of Description.....	215
4.2.2.3- Variations in the Students' Intentions: Categories of Description .....	231
4.3- The Outcome Space.....	245
Conclusion .....	247

**Chapter Five:**  
**Discussion, Interpretation, and Pedagogical Implications**

Introduction .....	252
5.1- Discussion and Interpretation of the Prior-Experience of Studying of Linguistics.....	253
5.1.1- Prior-Conceptions of Linguistics.....	254
5.1.1.1-Category A: Linguistics as a Quantitative increase in Knowledge about the Historical and Philosophical Study of Language.....	253

5.1.1.2- Category B: Linguistics as the Acquisition and Accumulation of Knowledge about the English Language.....	256
5.1.1.3- Category C: Linguistics as Understanding Practical knowledge And Analyzing Languages.....	258
5.1.1.4- Category D: Linguistics as Making Sense of the Linguistic Information and Critically Reflecting over Languages .....	261
5.1.1.5- Levels of the Prior-Conceptions.....	262
5.1.2- Prior- Approaches of Linguistics .....	267
5.1.2.1- Approach A: Memorizing Isolated Pieces of Information with the Intention to Reproduce them in any Future Assessment.....	268
5.1.2.2- Approach B: Understanding and Memorizing Information with the Intention to be Prepared for a Future Assessment.....	269
5.1.2.3- Approach C: Understanding and Relating Pieces of Information with the Intention to have a Holistic Understanding.....	271
5.1.2.4- Levels of the Prior-Approaches:.....	271
5.2- Discussion and Interpretation of the Text-Based Experience Studying of Linguistics .....	278
5.2.1- Text-Based Conceptions of Studying Linguistics .....	279
5.2.1.1- Conception A: Linguistics is an Externally Imposed Subject to be Assessed.....	279
5.2.1.2 Conception B: Linguistics as Looking for the Hidden Meaning....	281
5.2.1.3- Conception C: Linguistics as Personally Reflecting over the Linguistic Knowledge .....	282
5.2.2.4-Levels of the Text-Based Conceptions of Studying Linguistics.....	285
5.2.2- Text-Based Approaches to Studying Linguistics.....	286
5.2.2.1- Approach A: Reproducing the Texts Knowledge with the Intention to Complete the Task.....	287



5.2.2.2- Approach B: Reconstructing the Message of the Texts with the Intention to Understand the Hidden Meaning.....	287
5.2.2.3- Approach C: Personally Reconstructing of the Message in Relation to the Course of Linguistics with the Intention to Construct a Holistic Linguistic knowledge .....	288
5.2.2.4- Levels of the Text-Based Experience Approaches of Studying Linguistics.....	288
5.3- Nature of the Study of Linguistics .....	292
5.5- Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations.....	297
5.6- Contribution to Higher Education.....	306
Conclusion.....	310
<b>General Conclusion</b>	
1- Review of the Key Findings.....	312
2- Contribution of this Study to Existing Literature .....	315
3- Suggestions for Further Research.....	316
4- Personal Reflections .....	318
5- Concluding Observations.....	320
<b>REFERECES</b> .....	321
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Open-ended Question .....	333
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Approaches to Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST).....	334
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Text-Based Task (1) .....	339
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Text-Based Task (2) .....	341
<b>Appendix 5:</b> Allocation of the students along the prior-approaches and Prior-conceptions of studying Linguistics.....	343
<b>Appendix 6:</b> The content of the second Year Course of Linguistics.....	344
<b>ABSTRACT IN ARABIC</b> .....	346

# **General Introduction**

## **General Introduction**

### **1- Background of the Research:**

The focus of the present study is the undergraduate students' experience of learning, a field of research into learning in general and in higher education in particular that started in late 1970 and recognized as a well-established field of research in the early 1980s. The central concern of the experience of learning research is to understand why learners tend to learn differently while they seem to have gone through the same classroom experience (Ellis, 2015; Ramsden, 2013).

Research on the students' learning has traditionally focused on how the learner is affected by the context of learning, teaching practices and decisions (Ashwin, 2009), assuming that there is a cause and effect relationship between these variables. This perspective in considering the students' learning neglects the possibility that the learner may not simply be affected by the context of learning but also act on that context. In other words, the learners might create, along with the teacher, a given learning situation based on their conceptions of learning. Conceptions of learning refer to what the student believes learning, a subject of study, or learning materials to be (Marton, 1981). They are said to derive from the various sources including the learner's prior learning experience (Entwistle, 1997). The experience of learning research has shown that the learning conceptions is an important variable in the process of learning because it impacts how they approach learning, which in turn greatly affects the quality of the learning outcomes (Ramsden, 1992; Marton and Booth, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). A learning approach refers not only to the strategies that the learner adopts but also the motives behind it (Marton, 1981). The combination of students' conceptions of and

approaches to learning along with the learning outcomes is what constitutes the students' experience of learning in the present study (Entwistle, 1997; Marton and Saljo, 1979).

Studies on learning conceptions and originated in the works of Saljo (1979) and Marton and Saljo (1981) when they attempted to develop a research approach that would account for the students' process and outcomes of learning. They (ibid) argued that unless learning is researched from the students' perspectives in the context of the classroom, the results will lack 'ecological validity' (Entwistle, 1997; Marton and Saljo, 1981), i.e. the applicability of the research findings in real contexts. One of the main implications of Marton and Saljo's study is the development of a research approach to investigate the students' learning in higher education termed 'phenomenography', defined by Marton (1994: 24) as:

The empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us, are experienced, conceptualized, understood, perceived, and apprehended.

A key aspect in this research approach is to engage into investigating learning from the students' perspective and based on their own accounts of their learning experiences. Said differently, the emphasis is on the experience of learning as reflected on by the students' themselves and not as viewed by the teachers, or interpreted by the researcher (Entwistle, 1997).

Besides, the learning conceptions of and approaches to learning are said to be fundamentally context-driven (Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 2013). Hence, there is a need to consider the students' various ways of conceiving and approaching their learning in different learning and cultural contexts, and various disciplines. In relation to this, Lucas (2001: 161) strongly argued that:

It would be premature to conclude that little remains to be learnt about the way in which students approach their learning. In particular, a review of the literature indicates that there is a clear need for further research to be conducted within specific disciplinary settings.

Lucas (ibid), among many other phenomenographers, emphasizes the benefit of carrying out phenomenographic studies in various academic disciplines. In fact, there is a growing interest in as diverse cultural and disciplinary settings for research within the students learning research, given that phenomenographic findings are context-specific (Ramsden, 2013; Ellis, 2010). According to the extensive review of phenomenographic studies of Prosser and Trigwell (1999), much of the phenomenographic research in higher education investigated the students' experience of learning in scientific fields, such as physics, biology, and mathematics (Creswell et al, 1994). Rebele et al (1991) called for research on students' learning experience in accounting disciplines, arguing that the context of learning and disciplinary demands change the students' learning experience. Sharma (1996, 1999, 2001) was interested in the students learning in accounting disciplines, and explicitly called for further research in this field due to the benefits it could have on designing more grounded curricula in higher education. In defending this argument, Sharma (1996: 126) maintained that:

Student learning does not take place in a vacuum. Evidence supporting this contention that students tend to organize their learning behaviour according to their perceptions of the learning-teaching environment abound in higher education research.

He (ibid) concluded stating that:

It is therefore critical that we understand how our students learn, what they conceive learning to be and how learning-teaching context influences their learning.

Thus, phenomenographers strongly argue that conceptions of learning should be examined not only in terms of the students' social and cultural background, but also within their disciplinary contexts (Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 1988, 2003, 2013). Indeed, Entwistle (1997: 26) acknowledged that *"this is an area of research which is, so far, undeveloped and needs attention"*, suggesting that more phenomenographic studies need to be carried out in as many academic disciplines as possible.

It is of interest that the scope of the students' experience of learning be open for further phenomenographic studies within various disciplines, including the human and language sciences disciplines, including Linguistics. The experience of studying Linguistics, which is the focus of the present research, has not been investigated from a phenomenographic research perspective. The rationale for this is discussed in the next section.

## **2- Statement of the Problem:**

Despite the fact that the phenomenographic students' learning research was initiated as early as the late 1970s, it is still lacking in the Algerian university context. Little attention has been paid to the students' experience of learning academic disciplines and courses and its impact on the learning and teaching process in our universities. Consequently, little is known about the students' various learning conceptions and approaches adopted in the Algerian context. Conceptions of learning, even when tackled, are not investigated from a phenomenographic point of view; the term conception is often considered as synonymous with perceptions or beliefs, which have been extensively, investigated using the qualitative interpretive research approach. Initiating phenomenographic studies that emphasize learning in our universities is quite beneficial given the implications that such research might have for designing effective learning and teaching contexts.

Besides, over the years, and despite the increasing interest in the students' learning research in tertiary education in various contexts, Studying Linguistics, in its own right, can be said to be under-investigated. Extensive review of the phenomenographic literature has shown that no investigations, as to my knowledge have been concerned with the students' conceptions of and approaches to studying Linguistics as a discipline. In the absence of local research, it is reasonable for Linguistics teachers and curricula designers to embrace educational teaching practices and theories not only based on disciplines other than Linguistics, but also coming mostly from Western countries. Hence, in this study, we argue for the importance of adopting a culturally sensitive perspective in the local higher education; a phenomenographic research approach is therefore most needed.

The present study addresses this gap in the phenomenographic research literature by involving a group of Algerian students in expressing their learning conceptions and approaches to Linguistics with the objective of understanding the nature of Linguistics learning in our context. It is a phenomenographic study into students' experiences of studying Linguistics within the Department of English undergraduate curriculum. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the Review of the Literature, researching the learning conceptions and approaches differs by definition from one discipline to another in its implementation.

Furthermore, Linguistics is assumed to be a subject-matter that deserves our attention for various reasons. First, teaching Linguistics is popular in the faculty of languages in the University of Algiers 2, where there is a combination of modules relevant to language. This includes teaching the different productive and receptive language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), and sub-skill (grammar and phonetics), in addition to content modules namely Literature, Civilization, and Linguistics. The content modules are considered as the basis for the two different specialties: these are

Anglophone Literature and Civilization, and Linguistics and Didactics. Contrary to the other content modules, Linguistics is not familiar to the students' experience prior to the university level. In other words, the students' experience of learning Linguistics starts at university, which makes it a distinctive academic discipline in the experience of the undergraduate students in the Department of English.

In addition, it is largely assumed in educational research that teachers might be more genuinely interested in the students' learning experience if the focus of research is directed at issues within their own teaching context. Related to this, is the fact that, being a teacher of Linguistics, we assumed that it would be suitable to stay within the area of our skill and experience in addressing the complex students learning issues.

Besides, the need for deep and intensive information of the learning approaches implied a selection of the academic tasks in order to generate data of what the students have understood. Based on Prosser and Trigwell (1999) framework of the students' learning research, conceptions of learning Linguistics should not be vaguely investigated, they had to be investigated taking into consideration the learning activities that take place in the linguistics lecture. Indeed, the learning activities are what constitute the students' learning situation (Entwistle, 1997). The present study attempts to address the way in which the students make sense of Linguistics by exploring the experience of studying materials that revolve around understanding academic linguistic texts. The choice of academic texts in this study was triggered by the vital role they play in the students' academic experience. Indeed, using academic texts by lecturers is quite common in the context of our study given that the purpose is teaching the linguistic content using English as Foreign language; yet, unfortunately, very little is known about our students' conceptions and approaches to studying text-based tasks. In fact, the students' understanding of the texts, their intentions and the outcome



of these texts in natural settings and the students' accounts of that experience constitute the students' conceptions of Linguistics (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). It is important to note that this study is not interested in the reading skill, but rather in the students' text-based experience (Marton and Saljo, 1993), where reading is only one part of the whole learning experience. As a matter of fact, exploring how the students make sense of what they read in an academic context is an inquiry into the students' capacity to generate knowledge. Thus, reading academic texts becomes more than a technical skill; as Saljo (1997: 89) pointed out that:

A core feature of much reading that is carried out in academic contexts is that individuals are required to see something in the outside world- be it a structure of physical objects, an historical development resulting in major social changes, or evolution- in a perspective which is not a familiar part of everyday thinking, consequently in the kind of reading that we do as students in order to learn, our present understanding of the world around us is often challenged, and this, we suggest, causes problems that have considerable pedagogic significance.

Furthermore, when designing and analyzing the findings we were not interested in 'how much' is learnt from the texts, but rather, 'what is learnt' as a result of that experience; hence, the qualitative outcome of learning. In other words, it is an inquiry into the process of knowledge-generation in an academic learning situation. This clarifies the fact that reading as a language skill is far from being the focus for this study. The objectives of the present study are explored in the following section.

### **3- Objectives of the Study and Research Questions:**

As previously argued, much is to be explored in the students' learning experience in higher education in general and in the Algerian university in particular, especially, within the various university disciplines. The present study is therefore set out to achieve these broad objectives:

- Identify the various ways the students conceive and approach Linguistics in the beginning of the course,
- Understand the various ways the students conceive and approach a set of text-based tasks in Linguistics, and
- Explore the key aspects of what constitutes studying Linguistics for undergraduate students.

Based on the background and rationale discussed in the previous sections, the primary objective for this research is to understand what learning is conceived to be from the students' perspectives. To achieve this goal, it was crucial to explore the students' conceptions of learning and approaches to learning in natural learning situations in order to depict the various ways the students experience learning Linguistics (Entwistle, 1997). It is fundamental for this type of research to relate the experience of learning to a given learning situation, in the case of this study, the concern is with the subject of Linguistics. Thus, all the views expressed by the students about what knowledge is and how understanding is to be achieved, had to be discussed in relation to the Linguistics. Following the framework set by Prosser and Trigwell (1999) to investigate the students' experience of learning in higher education from a phenomenographic perspective, there is a need to:

- Deeply consider not only various ways a group of students conceptualize and approach their studies.

- Take into consideration their prior-experience of learning; i.e., the prior-conception of and prior-approaches to learning held by the students in their learning experience prior to the learning situation under investigation.
- Consider the contextual factors affecting the participants' learning conceptions and approaches.

Based on this rationale, the following research and sub research questions guided the present investigation in order to achieve the previously stated objectives:

**RQ1:** What prior-experience do 2<sup>nd</sup> year students have about the study of Linguistics?

***Sub-RQ A:** What prior-conceptions do 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the stud of Linguistics?*

***Sub RQ B:** What prior-approaches do 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the stud of Linguistics?*

**RQ2:** What learning experience do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?

***Sub RQ A:** What conceptions do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?*

***Sub RQ B:** What approaches do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?*

**RQ3:** What does the students' study experience tell us about the nature of studying Linguistics?

#### **4- Motivation for the Study:**

Like most educational research interests, this research idea came out of a critical consideration of our personal teaching experience in the Department of English, which has become significant only in retrospect when I decided to turn my observations into a formal research.

Our interest in the students' learning experience emerged within the changing environment of higher education in Algeria after the introduction of reforms during the last 15 years. Indeed, in 2009, the Department of English engaged in reviewing the curricula and assessment system as a result of introducing LMD. During the lecturers' pedagogical meetings, overwhelming criticisms of students' poor cognitive abilities have been constantly raised, particularly with regards to the content modules, including Linguistics. These issues are discussed and decisions are made; yet, possible explanations are not explored using research evidence. Indeed, despite the fact that recent research has revealed the importance of the students' conceptions of learning, to my knowledge, such research has not been initiated in our university. Consequently, the teachers possess an informal knowledge about what their students' learning approaches might be and how the courses could be conceived by the students. This situation raised my motivation to engage into listening to the students' voices, understand how our students learn, how they make sense of what we teach them, what they conceive learning to be, and how our teaching materials influence their learning approaches within the academic disciplines in our context.

Initially, my interest has been to investigate any mismatch between the teachers' pre-set objectives and expectations and the way the students perceive their teachers' lectures and the way in which they interpret them, with more focus on the students' perceptions. Said differently, the objectives were to identify the types of mismatch existing between the teachers' expectations and objectives and the students' interpretation of these

objectives in the content-based classroom. A pilot phase was conducted in April-May 2014 with two groups of students and two teachers of two content modules: Linguistics and Literature. The research method applied was to yield to quantitative data, using a special kind of measurement, based on elaborated and personalized checklists to be compared with the teachers' pre-set objectives.

However, unexpectedly, little feedback was collected on the part of the students and the teachers as to what causes the ambiguities and lack of mutual understanding. Our dissatisfaction with the data collected was mainly due to the fact that it yielded to the quantity of knowledge (how much was learnt), while the real problem seemed to be on the quality of the knowledge information they thought had understood (what was learnt, and how). As a result, the data obtained, mostly quantitative, did not address the issues we were trying to explore.

This initial study, in spite of its failure to provide us with satisfactory data, was quite beneficial in shaping our research interests with more precision. It enabled us to question not only the issues that needed to be researched, but also the research methods to be used. In fact, this experience, allowed us to regularly observe other teachers' classrooms, and informally get closer to the students as a researcher instead of teacher.

The main implication of this experience was the need to design a study which would allow the students to voice their thoughts. This initial study confirmed the theoretical background we had on the students' learning at university that considers the role the students' interpretation and understanding of the course content objectives as crucial for the learning outcomes. Thus, one cannot explain the students' outcomes without effectively addressing learning experience from the students' perspectives. Another important implication was the fact that the each student's views and understanding were observed to be unique and interestingly differs from one

student to another. This observation raised my interest to search for any research method or approach that would possibly allow us to capture the variety and not the similarity in the students' views of the same course content and objectives: highlighting the variety is what would make us understand the reason why some students seem to understand the course content in some sort of depth, while others merely struggle with information peripheral to the course. Taking all these research concerns, phenomenography seemed the most suitable approach for the present research, which relies extensively on the students' own accounts of their experience, with a focus on the variety instead of the similarity in the students' views and understanding.

Before dealing with discussing methodological issues, it is important to mention at this point that throughout this study term 'lecture' is used in this research instead of 'tutorial'. Despite the introduction of the LMD system, which requires tutorial system and continuous assessment, lecturing is inevitable in the Department of English, regarding the large number of the students in the groups, usually extends 50. Tutorials by definition do not contain more than 5 students, while in the context of this study, the number of the students is increasingly higher. It should be also mentioned that the 'lectures' referred to throughout this dissertation , did not take place in lecture amphitheatres, the normal setting for lectures, but rather in big classrooms that normally can contain more than 60 students. How significant this study might be, is what is explored in the next section.

##### **5- Significance of the Study:**

Lecturers in the Department of English engage into pedagogical activities both inside and outside the classroom not just with the aim of transmitting knowledge that is hoped to be deeply understood by the students. However, it

is argued that designing lectures and course content cannot be beneficial unless the students' conceptions of and approaches to studying that course content are carefully examined. By directly investigating the students' conceptions of and approaches to studying Linguistics, this research is expected to be able to uncover the complex and less complex ways in which the students conceive and approach the study of Linguistics. It is also hoped to provide guidance to lecturers and educators on what aspects of teaching and learning need to be improved in ways that make sense for the students.

Because the research findings are directly drawn from the natural setting of teaching-learning Linguistics, they are also hoped to contribute to the design of Linguistics curricula, syllabuses, and teacher training programs. The research findings of the present study are also hoped to motivate other researchers to carry out investigations into conceptions of learning in other academic courses. These finding could be explored to examine how conceptions of different subject-matters relate to each other.

## **6- Definition of the Key Terms:**

The literature on higher education research reveals that the concept of learning conceptions and learning approaches are anything but simple. In this section, we provide a clarification of these key terms that will be used throughout the dissertation. A broader discussion of each of these terms is to be provided in the review of the literature.

### **6.1-Learning and Studying:**

The definition of learning differs depending on whether it is considered as a cognitive process, a behavior or a process of construction of knowledge (Lucas, 2000). If it is considered as a cognitive process, which originates in the cognitive psychology, then the focus of research is on the mental processes related to the acquisition of skills and knowledge such as retention skills, strategies for activating working memory. Alternatively, if it is seen as a

behavior, which draws on the learning styles and learning strategies research, then learning is related to individual differences in the way the world is perceived and problems are solved. Lucas (2000, 480) argues that both views regards learning as *“Essentially context-free, in that learning styles and cognitive strategies operate relatively independently of changes in context”*.

An alternative view of learning is taken from constructivist psychology, which considers learning to be a process constructing knowledge that is essentially taking place in a social context (Entwistle, 1997; Marton and Ramsden, 1988; Lucas, 2000). This view is supported by phenomenographic research in which context plays an essential part of the construction of knowledge. Learning in phenenomenographic literature is related essentially to three important aspects: understanding, knowledge, and meaning. Svensson (1997: 68) defined learning as *“equivalent to what is new to understanding”*. For Marton et al (1993), it is viewed as a qualitative change in the learner’s way of understanding and conceptualizing a given phenomenon in real life. Given that the present research draws on the constructivist theory of learning, and follows phenenomenographic models of learning, Marton et al’s (1993) and Svensson’s (1997) definition are adopted.

At this level, it seems important to note that the students’ experience of learning research was initiated in higher educational contexts, and this implies the use of the term ‘studying’. Studying takes place in academic university settings, and it may seem more adequate to use the term ‘studying’ instead of ‘learning’ to describe the students’ experiences. However, the phenomenographic literature uses the term studying as synonymous to the term learning. Thus, the term ‘studying’ is used as a synonym to ‘learning’ all throughout this dissertation, although, there was a tendency on our part to use the term “studying” in relation to Linguistics tasks and learning materials.



## **6.2-Learning Conceptions and Approaches:**

From a phenomenographic research perspective the learning conceptions and approaches do not take place independently, but rather in relation to a learning phenomenon (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). This phenomenon could be an academic discipline, like mathematics or sociology; a learning task, such as a problem-solving task or a reading task; or a learning skill, such as negotiating or debating, or of knowledge in general, which is one of the most commonly researched topic (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004, Ellis, 2003). It is the process of interpreting a learning phenomenon that we refer to as a learning conception. A conception therefore is used to refer to 'a way of experiencing' something (Marton, 1981).

In addition, a learning conception entails two aspects namely, the referential and structural aspects. The former is the meaning or interpretation the learner gives to the learning phenomenon; and the latter is a way of acting in response to the students' understanding of the learning task (Ellis, 2007; Pratt, 1992).

The students' conceptions of learning are by definition related to their approaches to learning, which is used in phenomenographic to refer to what is done and why (Ellis, 2007; Entwistle, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). According to Ellis (2007: 2):

We use the term approach to learning as a way of characterizing what the students say they do, and we follow a phenomenographic convention of considering both structure (strategy) and reference (intention) when describing an approach to learning.

An approach to learning refers to the students' underlying motives when they engage in any pedagogical activity as well as the strategies they deploy. It is argued that the students' intentions when dealing with any learning tasks have an intricate relationship with the strategies used and are

affected the learning outcomes (Biggs, 1987, 1993; Tait and Entwistle, 1996; Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1996).

### **7- Limitations of the Study :**

This study is limited in its scope given that it was conducted with a group of 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students in the Linguistics Course. Despite the fact that it involved the participation of 40 students, its findings cannot be said to be generalized to other contexts. In fact, this is one of the main limitations of phenomenographic studies, in which the findings are relevant only and exclusively to that specific learning context in which the investigation was conducted. A more comprehensive study would have involved the experiences of the students in more advanced levels such as master or postgraduate students' learning experiences could have brought a broader examination of the students' experiences in different levels in the Department of English of the University of Algiers 2.

Furthermore, the present study was conducted over six months during one academic year. It was not possible to go beyond this period mainly because this investigation was entirely designed, conducted, and analyzed by the researcher following the guidance of the supervisor. Studies on learning conceptions would ideally be conducted over an extended period of time in order to consider any development in the learners' conceptions along with the factors affecting this change. Related to this, given that the present study was conducted over six months, it implied dealing with huge data collected along two stages. Ideally, this data could have been explored first by analyzing Stage 1 before moving to the collection of data in Stage 2; this might have revealed more interesting data in relation to the extent and manner in which the students change their conceptions and approaches through an extended period of time in their academic studies. However, after reviewing the

phenomenographic research literature, it has been observed that longitudinal phenomenographic studies are commonly conducted by more than one professional researcher. This was not the case of the present investigation and so conducting a longitudinal phenomenographic study was eliminated right from the beginning.

Related to this is the researcher's dual role in this study as both teacher and a researcher. It should be recognized that adopting this double role in a single qualitative phenomenographic study might affect the students' responses, especially during interviews. Entwistle (1997) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) highlighted the importance of investigating learning conceptions in the natural and normal setting of the classroom to eliminate any factors that might affect the students' accounts of their experiences. Although our role as a researcher was not disclosed to the students, our position as their interviewer and instructor could have impacted their responses.

In addition, given that this investigation was carried out in the academic year of 2015/2016, the changes which took place in the teaching learning environment after the spread of Covid-19 pandemic were unfortunately not taken into consideration. It is widely recognized in phenomenography that the students' conceptions change when the circumstances are not the same, even when expressed by the same student, let alone, when the whole learning situation changes. It is therefore undeniable that the findings might have been different if duplicated in the present circumstances of teaching and studying Linguistics in the same research context.

## **8- Structure of the Thesis:**

The present research is presented over five main chapters, in addition to the General Introduction and General Conclusion:

Chapter One reviews the literature relevant to present study with the emphasis is laid on the studies that have framed the present investigation. It also presents the development of the learning experience research that has contributed to our current understanding of the students' learning experience in higher education. In addition, the literature in Chapter One chapter provides a background for the both the research methodology and data analysis is subsequent chapters.

All the rationales for the various methodological decisions for this study are explored in Chapter two: it first elaborates on the choice of phenomenography and what it implies for both data collection procedure and analysis. Furthermore, the research procedure followed in the various stages of the study as well as the research instruments are both described and justified.

Given that the data collection went through important stages: namely Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the study (hereafter Stg1 and Stg2), this data analysis was presented in two different chapters respectively. Chapter Three presents the analysis of the prior-experience of studying Linguistics, which were collected in Stage 1 of the study. Chapter Four is devoted to the analysis of the data related to the text-based experience of studying linguistics collected in Stage 2 of the study.

Chapter Five brings the findings of the study together in a boarder discussion and deeper interpretation. It presents the discussion of the findings in both stages 1 and 2 of the study with the aim of answering all the research and sub-research question of the present investigation. And interpretation of the findings in the light of the phenomenographic literature

is provided in details in this chapter. Chapter Five is concluded by a number of pedagogical implications.

Finally, the key findings are further summarized in the General Conclusion highlighting the significance of this piece of research. The conclusion also makes suggestions for future research and highlights the significance if the study. A number of final thoughts about the researcher's experience with phenomenography are finally suggested.

**Chapter One**  
**Review of the Literature**

# **Chapter One**

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction:**

This chapter discussed the theoretical background in which this research is situated. It begins by exploring the development of the students' experience of learning research thoroughly by discussing the two main perspectives in which this field is situated, namely the meta-cognitive and phenomenographic ones. This is in order to identify the inadequacy in the existing theories and methodologies traditionally used to investigate the students' learning in higher education. In addition, an attempt is made to delineate the complexity of the students' experience of learning by exploring a set of key terms related to this field. We critically discuss further the research findings emerging from the experience of learning research. Finally, this chapter examines the methodological perspectives of the experience of learning research, namely phenomenography, clarifying its relationship to the social-constructivist theory, explaining how these ideas directly relate to the present study. We particularly discuss the relevance of a phenomenographic framework to our study, emphasizing the need for more research in our context.

### **1.1- Research into Students' Learning:**

Students' learning research draws on two main fields of research namely the psychological and the educational, both of which are discussed in this initial section.

### **1.1.1- Psychological Vs Educational Students Learning Research:**

Since the seventies, learning has been increasingly a subject of interest by psychological research, which can be observed in the impact of the cognitive psychology studies on the field of education. In fact, it is undeniable that cognitive psychology provided education with evidence on issues related to memory, learning, intelligence and individual differences, and information processing. However, psychological research on learning proved to be of little utility in improving teaching and learning in higher education (Entwistle, 1997; Biggs, 2003). Biggs (2003) attributed this failure of psychological research on learning to positively impact teaching and learning to the fact that psychologists concerned themselves with developing the 'One Grand Theory' rather than improving teaching and learning. Similarly, Entwistle (1997) denied that the psychological research on learning could have any real positive impact on teaching and learning because it lacks 'ecological validity'. She (ibid) explains that much of this research derives from artificial settings and laboratories relying on non-realistic and superficial learning materials, which made any findings deriving from this research not easily applicable to real classroom settings.

The search for more utility in the findings of the research on learning and being concerned with 'ecological validity' (Entwistle, 1997) has led to the emergence of a new field of research known as the 'students' experience of learning' that derives from educational settings and focuses on the students' conceptions based on their own accounts. Before diving into this field, its principles and implications it is important to distinguish between two types educational research on students learning. The first has grown out of prediction studies is mainly quantitative and focuses on providing explanations for the students' academic achievement(Entwistle: 1997). Prediction studies derive mainly from the researcher's observations and interpretations of the students' answers to questionnaires and/ or interviews.



They also tend to blame the students for academic failure and put little responsibility on other factors. The findings of this type of research often imply a change in the practices of the students, such as incorporating new effective learning strategies (Biggs, 2003).

The second, however, is termed students' experience of learning research, rooted in phenomenography and draws on qualitative interpretive methods. The findings of this type of research derive from the students' own descriptions and accounts of their own learning experiences. The researcher's role is to scrutinize the students' own accounts to depict the variety in their interpretation of the same phenomenon. It is this concept that is directly relevant to our study. Thus, in this chapter, we will dive into the students' learning research from the students' experience of learning and phenomenographic perspective.

### **1.1.2- Students' Experience of Learning:**

The field of the students' experience of learning stemmed from research in higher education with the attempt to understand the complexities of what academic learning and teaching implies. The students' experience of learning has been investigated from two main perspectives: the meta-cognitive and the phenomenographic (Prosser, 2000; Biggs, 2003; Paakkari, 2012). The meta-cognitive research is concerned with the students' epistemological conceptions about knowledge and learning. Conversely, phenomenography explores the various meanings that different learners offer to the same phenomenon along with the various ways in which they go about learning (Schommer, 1994; Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty, 1993).

These two research perspectives arose out of dissatisfaction with the traditional epistemological and methodological research frameworks. Traditionally, research looks at the epistemological beliefs of the students

from the outside, such as describing learning strategies and processes through which learners obtain certain knowledge, as is the case with the cognitive research tradition. The meta-cognitive tradition on the other hand, developed further these cognitive ideas with emphasis on understanding how knowledge is constructed by the learners (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty, 1994; Entwistle, 1998). These developments in looking at learning and knowledge as being constructed rather than discovered led to the development of meta-cognitive theories, in which the constructivist approach seems to be the most popular.

The constructivist approach focuses on the students' epistemological beliefs which individuals hold about the nature of knowledge (Bodner, 1986). Epistemology addresses the students' thinking, views, and conceptions; it is concerned with the individuals' views of how knowledge is acquired and how such beliefs impact the way the students' experience of learning. Such epistemological beliefs are said to play a role in the way the students approach their learning tasks and materials. Moreover, this perspective views knowledge as being essentially constructed by the students rather than transmitted by the teachers (Biggs, 1996), and this idea shifts the attention of the educationalists from the teachers to the learners.

Phenomenography on the other hand is about conceptions of learning. It was coined by Marton (1981) and is based on the assumption that a student's learning is the result of what he/she perceives rather than what teachers teach. It thus focuses on what the students think learning is. Phenomenography also lays emphasis on the variety in conceiving the same phenomenon; in other words, it looks at the qualitatively different ways in which the students learn. This is because learning, as Biggs (2003: 13) clearly puts it, under this research is regarded as:

a way of interacting with the world. As we learn, our conception of phenomena change, and we see the world differently. The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about such a change, but the way we structure that information and think with it does.

In this quotation, Biggs (ibid) clearly emphasizes the role of the individual's conceptions on his/her experience of learning, and this implies that teaching should be concerned with changing the way the students view the world rather than simply transmitting knowledge and information.

It should be noted that while distinguishing between the two perspectives to studying students' experience of learning has to be made clear; however, it is recognized that they are not incompatible. Indeed, common to both perspectives is the focus on the student's own conceptions and descriptions of their learning experience as they interact with different learning activities. In fact, the constructivist theory represents the philosophical underpinning of phenomenography. This latter is a more a research perspective than a theoretical one(Prosser, 2000; Paakkari, 2012).

The shift in focus when addressing the students' learning led to the introduction of complex concepts to describe learning such as 'understanding', 'conceptions of learning', and 'conceptions of knowledge', and the 'experience of learning', all of which are of focal importance to the present study.

The term understanding has become central in the investigation the students' learning. Entwistle (1998) strongly argued that understanding how complex concepts are developed and constructed by the learners should be the focus of any research on learning. This can be achieved only by considering the students' own accounts of their own learning experiences in which the concepts are constructed (Entwistle, 1998). In this respect, we should be addressing the students' conceptions of knowledge. While it is

recognized that all of these concepts contribute to the meaning of “the student’s experience of learning”, there seems to be little agreement on what might mean. Given its complexity, it is important to delineate what the term “students’ experience of learning” means; especially that it is often recognized as ambiguous.

Acknowledging the confusion and ambiguity of the term, Barnett (1995) distinguishes between four different meanings of the term “experience of learning”, these are:

- a) *A set of intentions held by the course team.*
- b) *The classroom situations and events to which the students are exposed to inside the classroom or laboratory where both the teachers and the students are interacting.*
- c) *The overall situation in which students are likely to find themselves during their course both inside and outside the campus.*
- d) *The inward experience of individual students as they struggle to make sense of the intellectual and emotional demands of the curriculum.*

While all of these definitions suggested by Barnett (1995) are appropriate, the (b) and (d) meanings are the most relevant to the present research essentially concerned with the way the students make sense of specific learning materials in the Linguistics classroom. The students’ experience of leaning field is used in the present study to refer to the individual student’s interpretation, understanding, and views about specific course contents, learning activities or material in a given learning situation (Entwistle, 2000). It focuses on the student activity from the students’ perspective, i.e., the student’s own description of what he/she does when trying to make sense of what he/she receives in their university course and the knowledge he/ she acquires during his academic experience. The students’ experience of learning research, essentially based on the meta-cognitive and phenomenographic

approaches, is explored in the next section, in which the growth of this field of research in depth from early to recent trends are reviewed. In this chapter, the literature on students' learning will be reviewed from both the met-cognitive and phenomenographic perspectives and clarify their relevance to the present study. Special emphasis will be laid on the phenomenographic perspective in investigating the learners' experience of learning as it is the approach adopted in much of the recent studies.

### **1.1.3- Research into the Students' Experience of Learning in Undergraduate Education:**

Educational research on student has originated in Marton and Saljo's (1976) seminal studies in Gothenburgh University in Sweden, known as the 'Gothenburgh studies' (Biggs, 2003; Entwisle, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). However, the growing interest in understanding the students' experience of learning started to gradually grow earlier than the Gothenburgh studies. The initial interest for this field of research started with three main studies, two of which were carried out in the United States by Howard Becker (1968) and William Perry (1970), and the other, in UK, by Millar and Parlett (1974). These are discussed chronologically and with some detail in this section.

One of the earliest studies which took the students' learning experience in higher education as the focus of research was Becker and his colleagues' (1968). These researchers studied the students' experience in a broad sense; they were concerned with the social and academic life of their subjects with little focus on the content being studied. Becker and his colleagues (1968) used a social anthropologist approach as they entered into the world of the students' life inside the classroom and relied on participant observation and detailed field-notes. The most striking finding of this study was that the

students learning seemed to depend on the assessment demands. In other words, the students' main objective was to achieve high grades during their academic experience. This study was mainly criticized for giving little attention to the content of what the students were studying.

Having a different research focus, Perry (1970) was interested in Harvard university students' intellectual and ethical development during their tertiary learning. He developed nine stages model of intellectual and ethical development progressing from a simplistic 'absolute' conception of knowledge to a complex 'relativist' one. This model was summarized into four levels related to students' conceptions of knowledge; which is also known as 'epistemological beliefs'. Indeed, Perry (ibid) claimed that the student's conceptions of knowledge are development and argued that the students seemed to gradually go through four stages to conceptualize knowledge: Dualism, Multiplicity, Contextual Relativism, and Commitment in Relativism.

Following this model, the students initially hold a 'dualistic' view of knowledge as being right or wrong, good or bad, often transmitted from an authority, such as a lecturer or an author. In this initial stage, the students seemed to believe that questions raised during their undergraduate learning have or in real life have simple answers, which are either right or wrong. However, Perry (1970) indicated that the student gradually started to recognize multiplicity instead of dualism, in viewing knowledge. In other words, the students realized that every question or issue may have various solutions, and every idea may have multiple interpretations. During the contextual Relativism stage, the students start to perceive that people's interpretations are correct only when taking their context into consideration. Finally, the students end up believing that knowledge is actually relative in all contexts and situations; relativism is therefore a rule not an exception. Actually, they realize the need to make a personal commitment to a personal interpretation derived from relevant evidence. Interestingly, Perry (ibid)

argued that no evidence is available to claim that progression from one stage to another is continuous; the students may reverse the process and may move from one stage to another.

In UK, Miller and Parlett's (1974) study was close to Perry's (1970) investigation on the students' learning experience; they attempted to explore the students' reactions to assessment procedure in Edinburgh. Miller and Parlett (1974) carefully selected a small number of students from a restricted number of departments. They (ibid) applied the illuminative evaluation principle to their research and adopted Becker's (1968) methodology based on participant observation, but also used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Despite the originality of the research methodology used, which was unfamiliar, it received a lot of criticism mainly for the validity of the findings. Miller and Parlett (1974) recognized the fact that the methodology might be unfamiliar in educational research, but strongly defended the quality of the findings. Being aware of the criticism they might receive, Miller and Parlett (ibid) expressed an interesting view of the research validity, and argued that one crucial way to check the validity of the study was to judge the extent to which it presents "a recognizable reality to those who read it" (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972: 12).

In their analysis, Miller and Parlett (1974) were caught by the element of consciousness in the students' experience of assessment procedure that was the major theme rising from the data. The students were found to seek 'cues' in their context to guide their experience of going through any assessment procedure. They were, subsequently, categorized into three different categories: the cue-seeker, the cue-conscious and the cue-deaf. Both the cue-seeker and the cue-conscious are aware that there are cues necessary for their assessment experience. The 'cue-seekers' look for the 'cues' that would eventually help him/ her passing any assessment used to grade the students. For example, they would look for the typical examination questions

previously used to evaluate the students in that course, and who their oral examiner was. In contrast, the cue-conscious students made no deliberate attempt to seek the cue from the staff as directly as the cue-seekers. The study also identified a third category called the 'cue-deaf' students. These are different from the first two in that they hold different beliefs about assessment demands. Grades from them were not influenced by the staff judgments and subjectivity, and so they regarded the assessment system as objective.

These three works significantly impacted the field of research on students' learning in higher education. Perry's (1970) outstanding study on conceptions of knowledge encouraged more researchers to focus on the students' learning. One trend of research of research focused on the students' epistemological beliefs about knowledge. It is considered as meta-cognitive which mostly employed quantitative methodology to investigate the students' beliefs of knowledge. Another trend explored the students' conceptions of and approaches to learning initiated by Marton and Saljo (1981). These studies, first carried out in UK, were mainly qualitative and adopted phenomenography as a basis for their research methods, which resulted in developing a number of inventories to explore how the students approach learning.

While Perry's work is widely recognized seminal in initiating research on students' learning, Miller and Parlett's (1974) study marked a remarkable change in perspective and methodology in educational research. This can be observed in the clear shift the focus from "*the teacher's or the researcher's view to that of the student's*" (Entwistle, 1997: 16). As a consequence, higher education research knew a growing interest in understanding students' experiences, focusing on the ways in which the students go about learning essentially from the students' perspective.



Research into the experience of learning was therefore carried out from two different perspectives: phenomenographic or epistemological perspectives. In this section, Both of these research orientations are reviewed, with some emphasis on the students' experience of learning from the phenomenographic perspective, which is the approach adopted in the present study.

Moreover, experience of learning research that stemmed as a result of Miller and Parlett's study (1974) implied also a change in the research methodology. Miller and Parlett's (ibid) use of interviews as a main research tool strongly influenced most pioneering studies on the students' learning to imply this qualitative research tool as essential to collect data. The overall research methodology and orientation of the present study is very much close to Miller and Parlett's (1974), and so this chapter will outline the research studies that followed this perspective and approach. We shall turn now to explore more literature dealing with the main concepts used in the students learning research.

### **1.2- Concepts Describing the Students' Experience of Learning:**

Much of research on students' experience of learning is based on the premise that people act according to their interpretations of situations, which implies that exploring people's interpretations is crucial to understanding their experiences. These interpretations are not only varied but also unique to each and every person: This is what is termed phenomenography. This orientation in investigating learning, growing gradually in the mid-seventies to present, resulted in a literature with increasingly complex terms and concepts that often overlap (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

Indeed, developments of research into the students' experience of learning based on phenomenography can be said to have concentrated on two

major areas of the students' learning: conceptions of learning and approaches to learning (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser, 2000). The early studies on students' experience of learning looked at what students believed learning to be (conceptions of learning), the overall personal goals and motives during their academic experience (orientations of learning), and how they went about learning (approaches to learning).

In the following sections, I shall review in detail these research areas in order to provide as clearly as possible the theoretical framework of the present study. In this review of the literature, I shall focus on the concepts that are directly relevant to the present study: these are conceptions of learning and approaches to learning. Learning orientation will be presented in relation to conceptions of learning for two reasons: the first is that this area of research hasn't been directly researched in our study, and the second is because it is a broad term that overlaps with learning conceptions and approaches.

### **1.2.1- Conceptions of Learning:**

Research into the students' conceptions of learning is relatively recent and hasn't been fully developed and applied in various educational contexts to provide common ground (Ellis, 2008; Ramsden, 2013). Nevertheless, there is some concurrence in the findings of the major phenomenographic studies that allow us to define the concept of learning conceptions.

It should be recognized at the outset that the term 'conception' has been used by educational researchers to describe the students' general understanding of their discipline or subject area, for example, the students' conception of mathematics (Crawford et al, 1994) of physics (Lucas, 2000). It has been used to describe the students' views and understanding of what 'learning' and 'knowledge' might mean; in other words, the way the students conceptualize learning and knowledge (Entwistle, 1997). More narrowly, it could be used to refer to the students' understanding of specific learning tasks

such conception of writing an essay in sociology (Prosser and Webb, 1994). In the case of the present study, the term conception is used to refer to the students' understanding of Linguistics as an academic discipline and learning tasks used in the course of Linguistics. Nevertheless, as we shall see, in the analysis of data, the students' views about learning and knowledge stood as crucial themes that arose from the data; which might suggest that narrowing the scope of learning conceptions research is quite intricate.

A good way to start reviewing the literature on students conceptions of learning would be to use Saljo's (1979, 1982) study findings, often acknowledged as initiating phenomenographic investigations on the students' learning conceptions in higher education. Saljo's (1979) findings were based on the analysis of 90 students' responses to one question: "*What do you actually mean by learning*"? He (ibid) summarized all the answers in five different conceptions of leaning, which were further confirmed and refined three years later (Saljo, 1982). A sixth conception of learning was later identified by Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993), who found evidence of the existence of the same five conceptions of learning already identified by Saljo (1979, 1982). The following conceptions of learning were therefore identified:

- a) *Learning as increasing one's knowledge*: This is identified when the student's only purpose is to accumulate information often randomly and without seeking any understanding of the major concepts.
- b) *Memorizing and reproducing* : in this category, the purpose is accumulating information, it also implies the learners' effort to think about the way the information memorized could be reproduced with the objective to obtain good marks.
- c) *Learning as applying*: Learners with this conception understand learning beyond mere accumulation and recognize that learning is to apply what is learnt.

- d) *Learning as understanding*: This is when learning becomes an act of making sense of the information, the information is not just accumulated or memorized but also turns into a meaningful ideas, often because it is viewed as relevant to the student's life.
- e) *Seeing something in a different way*: At this stage, the ideas are not just meaningful but also personal; the student at this stage, makes direct connections with his/her personal and real life.
- f) *Learning as changing as person*: The most sophisticated conception is when learning becomes essentially about changing implying that learning is intricately related to evolving in real.

The three studies (Saljo, 1979, 1982; Marton et al, 1993) cited above are recognized as pioneering in this area of research. Saljo's (1979, 1982) study showed evidence of a diversity in the way students conceive learning ranging from those who saw learning as mainly about storing and reproducing information and those who conceive learning as a way of making sense of ideas for themselves, transforming the information they receive into 'personal meaning'. Saljo's (1979, 1982) findings were similar to Perry's (1970) model of intellectual development, but clearly focused on conceptions of learning rather than conceptions of knowledge, initiating therefore a new perspective to look at the students' experience of learning.

More recently, Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993) came out with same conceptions of learning originally identified by Saljo (1979, 1982), but added a sixth one. They tried to define the conceptions with more precision through differentiating between qualitative and quantitative conceptions of learning. Clearly the three first conceptions of learning: a) *Learning as increasing one's knowledge*, b) *Learning as applying*, and c) *Learning as understanding*, can be identified as quantitative since they are concerned with learning as accumulation of information provided by an external authority. The three later conceptions of learning are qualitative as they describe students who

attempt to make sense for ideas for themselves. Learning for the second qualitative category is more personal. Other studies in different contexts suggested similar findings, to mention some: Van Rossum and Schenk(1984); and Van Rossum and Taylor(1987); Morgan and Gibbs(1980). All of these studies validated the six conceptions of learning identified by Saljo (1979, 1982) and Marton et al (1993).

Another interesting account of the students' variation of the students' experience of learning can be observed in and Lucas' (2001) research into students' experience. This is a widely reported study revealed the extent to which the academic discipline or domain of knowledge influences the student's conceptions of learning. Indeed, studies on students' experience of Accounting as a distinct discipline were among the first that called for a different perspective in researching students' learning. The impact of Lucas (2001) and Sharma's (2000) studies of the development of the learning experience research is to be revealed in the next sections.

A similar study by Crawford et al's (1994) focused on the students' conceptions of mathematics. In this study, the purpose was to understand the students' conceptions of Mathematics as they start their course. In this study the concept of prior-conceptions was coined to refer to the students' understanding of the Mathematics based on the . This study revealed a variation in the individual students' conceptions of mathematics. This latter was conceived as:

- a)** *The study of numbers and the application of various methods of changing numbers.*
- b)** *The study of numbers and their applications in other subjects and the physical world.*
- c)** *The study of logic. Numbers and symbols are used to study life in a systematic perspective and require the mind to think in a logical and often precise manner.*

- d) An abstract reasoning process which can be utilized to explore and solve problems.*
- e) Techniques for thinking about observable, physical phenomena in a quantitative way and also for thinking more abstractly with little or no relation to the directly observable universe.*

(Crawford et al, 1994 cited in Prosser and Trigwell, 1999: 28)

An interesting finding of the studies reviewed above, which is of direct interest to the present research, is that the learning conceptions have an impact the students focus of attention when dealing with the learning activities and learning materials (Ashwin, 2006). A student having a quantitative conception of learning tend to reproduce the learning material, while those holding qualitative conception focus on interpreting the meaning behind the material.

Another key characteristic of the learning conceptions is their developing aspect; they are by definition developmental, as Biggs (2003: 13) roughly put it in this quotation:

Our conceptions of phenomena change, and we see the world differently. The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about a change, but the way we structure that information and think with it does. Thus education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information.

Therefore, the changing aspect of the learning conceptions is inevitable; especially given the research evidence that supports this idea Entwistle (1997) reviewed a number of case studies showing that the students enter university with very negative conceptions of learning. But when going through different stages of higher education, the students tend to gradually have a broader conception of learning. However, the same case studies showed that this

change does not take place automatically with every student's experience; it depends on a number of learning aspects such as the clarity of the objectives, the quality of the student-teacher interaction (Biggs, 2003).

Conceptions of learning are closely interlinked with another key concept in the approaches to learning, to which we shall turn next.

### **1.2.2- Approaches to Learning:**

One major implication emerging from Saljo's (1979, 1982) and Marton et al's (1993) studies is that the way a student views learning, i.e. his/her learning conception, determines the way he/she goes about learning, i.e. his/her learning approach, implying that these concepts are intricately interrelated. These phenomenographers strongly argued that the student's conceptions of learning determine his/her approach to learning.

The term approach to learning refers to a specific way of dealing with a study task or study material as a result of the student's understanding of the task's instructions and demands (Entwistle, 1991). It "*describes a relationship between the student and the learning he/she is doing*" (Ramsden, 1992: 44). In this definition, approaches to learning are about the qualitative rather than the quantitative side of learning; in other words, learning approaches are about "how" the students as individuals experience their learning tasks rather than "how much" they learn as a result of a given learning task.

In a widely reported study, Marton and Saljo (1976), were interested in exploring the ways in which the students went about reading academic articles. In this study, they (ibid), asked the students to read an academic article related to the content of their subject matter, and then interviewed the selected students about the way they went about this experience of reading with the aim to find out how the students. This method of investigating the student's learning was termed phenomenography.

Based on their phenomenographic study, Marton and Saljo (1976) made a distinction between two qualitatively different ways of learning that the students might use in approaching a given learning task.. These were termed “surface” and “deep” approaches to learning. “Surface approach” is related to the students who tend to memorize and reproduce the information they acquire through the learning task. This approach is characterized by a lack of reflection while completing the task and so, the students adopting this approach make use of lower order thinking skills. These students regard learning as imposed and external to their interest, and often fail to find an internal motivation or personal interest in the learning tasks or materials they engage in.

In contrast, “deep approach” is related to ‘understanding’ the material and looking beyond what is presented on the surface. In other words, the students adopting this approach do not confine themselves to the information presented in the task, but rather, attempt to relate ideas to previous knowledge, evaluating arguments and manifest an interest in the content of the task or learning material.

A third approach “strategic approach” was later identified by Ramsden (1979, 1981), one of the pioneers in this field of research, who found out that there is a group of students who are mainly concerned about achieving high grades; it is the reason is why this approach might also be termed ‘achieving approach’. The students adopting this approach typically manage their learning in a way that meets their examiners’ expectations with the aim of obtaining high grades. The most important aspect of learning for these students is to find out how best they can met the assessment needs in order to safely pass from one academic year to another. Ramsden’s third category of students is very close to Miller and Parlett’s (1974) third category of students called the cue-seekers’ mentioned earlier in this chapter.



An approach to learning from this phenomenographic perspective is therefore defined as *“the relationship between the student and the particular task with which he/she is engaged”* (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999: 39). This implies a strong relationship between the context and the approach adopted by the students. Indeed, while both Marton et al (1993) and Saljo (1979) recognize the influence of conceptions of learning on the students approach, Laurillard (1979) and Ramsden (1993) further claimed that learning context is another main factor affecting the students’ approach to learning. In this sense, the students tend to adopt one approach instead of another in response to a given context or environment. More interestingly, Entwistle (1991) and Ramsden (1993) both argued that what actually counts in the students’ experience of learning is not so much the context of learning, but rather the students’ perceptions of their context. The approach to learning adopted by the student is a response to the perceived learning context, which is unique to each individual student. The student’s perception of his learning in a given learning context is what Prosser and Trigwell (1999) referred to as ‘the learning situation’. To make this argument clear, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) made a distinction between the terms ‘learning context’, which is also called environment, and ‘learning situation’ as follows:

We use context to describe ‘the real world’ that does not include the student. It could be the teaching package prepared by the teacher or it could be the teaching. It could be the science laboratory or the engineering workplace. A situation is what is constituted when a student enters the context. It is the relationship between the students and the context and is unique to each student. It is for example the interaction between the student and the laboratory.

This implies that if we are to positively impact students’ learning, it is crucial is to change the student’s perception of his learning situation rather than being over-concerned with changing the context of learning.

Moreover, research has made it clear that approaches to learning are strongly related to the quality of the students' learning outcomes (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 2003). The use of a surface approach in learning results in a low cognitive engagement which leads to fragmented outcomes. In contrast the use of a deep approach engages the students in active thinking skills the stem from a internal interest in personally making sense of the learning activity or material, which results in the students being able to explain the meaning which lays beyond the surface. Research in Gothenburg University in Sweden, that was carried out by Marton and Saljo (1976) provided evidence of this argument. They found out that the students who, in reading a text, used a deep approach were able to successfully explain its meaning as compared to those who used a surface approach. Many other studies which followed this study confirmed similar findings.

Approaches to learning research based on phenomenography have significant developments that cannot be overlooked. It resulted in a quantitative type of research developed by Biggs (1978) in Australia, and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) in UK. It relied mostly on quantitative methods such as inventories and questionnaires. Biggs developed the Study Process Questionnaire to measure the student approaches to learning. It comprises of three scales: deep approach, surface approach and achieving approach. it should be noted that Biggs has initially adopted this cognitive perspective, believing an approach to learning as a stable learning style; however, he has subsequently expressed a different view of learning approaches closer to that expressed by Marton and Saljo (1982), which states that learning approaches are deeply affected by the context of learning.

In the following section, we will look at the interrelationship between these concepts with reference to the learning orientation, another crucial term in the phenenomenographic research literature.

### **1.2.3- The Interrelationships between Conceptions, Approaches, and Orientations to Learning:**

After analyzing the phenomenographic literature on the students' experience of learning, it is not difficult to observe that it can be hardly possible to consider learning conceptions without taking into consideration their approaches, which in turn is related to learning orientations. Despite the fact that this latter is not directly targeted by the present study, it seems important to note that it has been incorporated in the general framework for describing the students' experience of learning.

A learning orientation is considered as one of the broad concepts that is used to describe the students' reasons and personal motives as they start their academic experience in higher education. According to Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan (1997), the students might enter university having one of the four orientations: vocational, academic, personal or social.

The learning orientation is a concept that overlaps with conceptions of learning and approaches to learning. In fact, researchers acknowledge that learning orientations and learning conceptions are very close to each other, yet distinct. While both concepts are contextualized and typically developing, learning orientations are very personal and tend to be stable. Both learning orientations and learning conceptions are important in describing the students' ways of thinking and approaching learning tasks. In fact, the students' differing motives might tell us about whether the students have an intrinsic or external interest in their studies. This is believed to have an effect on the students' ways of studying. i.e., approaches to learning. There is empirical evidence that describes the interrelationship between the three concepts (Entwistle, 1998; Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan, 1997).

Positive conceptions of learning such as understating and changing as a person, which are reflected in the deep approach to learning, are related to

intrinsic academic and personal orientations. Conceptions of learning as accumulation of knowledge, which are reflected in the surface approach to learning, have been found to be associated with extrinsic social and vocational orientations. These findings have encouraged other researchers to incorporate the three concepts in very important inventories used to describe the students learning process such as Reflections on Learning Inventory (Meyer, 2000).

To summarize, this section has shown that the early research on students' learning research was much concerned with establishing research methodologies that might give educationalists more valid and concrete findings. However, more recent research has begun to look for widening this research to look for conceptions of learning in various cultural and disciplinary contexts. This has created two perspectives in researching students' learning across cultures and across disciplines; this will be the focus of the next section.

### **1.3- Students' Experience of Learning Research across Cultures and Disciplines:**

Many researchers argue that conceptions of learning may vary in terms of discipline and cultural background despite the similarities in conceptions of learning that has been observed in various contexts (Pillar and Boulton-Lewis, 2001). Recent developments in research into conceptions of learning, initially influenced by the Gothenburg studies, tried to focus on this variation of learning across cultures and across disciplines.

The students' learning research had its beginning in the Western countries. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of the studies on students' conceptions of leaning and knowledge have been conducted in UK, Sweden and Australia (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Entwistle, 1997). Studies carried

out in these parts of the world are considered as pioneering. However, they provide no evidence that the western learning conceptions are applicable to other contexts and environments. In his prominent study Saljo (1979: 104) argued that learning could be conceived in quite different ways according to *“different socially and culturally established conventions with respect to what counts as learning”*. This is because as Ramsden (2003) argued, learning conceptions and approaches are highly contextualized and are closely related to the environment of the learner. He (ibid) then stated that these aspects of student’s learning should be explored using case studies.

More recent research on students’ experience of learning started to develop in Asian countries, mostly in China and Japan, Hong Kong by Biggs (1987, 1991, 1992) and Marton et al (1996). This research was an attempt to understand the conceptions of learning from comparisons between Western and Asian culture to underline any differences or similarities in conceiving learning based on cultural differences. One of the most striking findings of these studies suggested that Chinese students rely extensively on memorization skills in their learning, which reflects the presence of a surface approach and a quantitative conception of learning. Unexpectedly, the same students showed very satisfactory learning outcomes, reflecting a qualitative conception of learning and the presence of a deep approach to learning.

Further studies on Asian conceptions of learning in China was conducted by Kember and Wong (2000) provided evidence confirming that Chinese students demonstrate high quality learning outcomes in Mathematics and Science compared to Western students, while at the same time, Western lecturers tended to describe Chinese students as passive and less involved in learning than Western students. Commenting on these findings, Kember (2000) concluded that a distinct conception of learning is actually identified in Chinese students where memorization and understanding are appropriately linked to each other and not contradictory.

A number of interesting findings came from a case study on conceptions of learning of a group of Nepalese university students conducted by Dahlin and Regmi (1997). This phenomenographic study concluded that the students expressed a conception of learning where memorization and understanding were closely related, which was not identified in their Western counterparts. Indeed, memorization and understanding were found to be two distinct conceptions of learning within the Western cultures.

Despite that research into the students learning experience in parts of the world other than Europe started to progress, the literature on students learning experience in North African cultures is absent. This observation is of importance to the present research which seeks to understand the students' experience of learning is and often neglected context due to the scarcity of studies in this context quite different from the European and Asian contexts, which have already been the focus of a number of studies. Entwistle (1997) recognizes that students' learning is still far from being complete. She stated (1997: 216: *"this is an area of research which is, so far, underdeveloped and needs attention"*). Actually research into student's conceptions of leaning has been criticized as being general and tends to assume that students' conceptions are more or less similar as compared to research into lecturers' conceptions of teaching.

In addition, many researchers (Entwistle, 1997, 200; Ramsden, 2003) argue that the academicdisciplinary impacts the students' learning experience. A number of studies looked at for whether student's learning experience was independent from their academic disciplines or domain of knowledge. Entwistle (1997) argued that the students' learning should not only be examined in terms of cultural contexts but also in terms of

disciplinary contexts. In spite of the advance in student's learning research, many researchers acknowledge the need for more elaborate studies within different academic disciplines (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden , 2003). A similar argument was expressed by Meyer and Ely (1999) who stated that conceptions of learning across disciplines are different. More recently, Trigwell and Ashwin (2006) coined the term 'situated conceptions' to refer to conceptions that students develop with accordance to their perceived learning contexts.

#### **1.4) Issues Emerging from Research on Students' Experience of Learning:**

Given the importance of the research methodology employed in understanding the experience of learning, it is adequate to elaborate on the issues raised by this field of research. The literature review on students' learning experience has indicated that the research methods employed in the various studies across disciplines and cultures essentially rely on interviews as the main elicitation technique. The semi-structured interviews, which is the most widely employed, typically includes a schedule which contains a list of issues to be explored by the interviewer. The analysis of the extracts from these interviews would lead to the identification of the conceptions of learning that the student's own words reveal. In fact, phenomenographic studies fundamentally rely on interviews as the main elicitation technique.

However, this methodology is not without limitations. It has been contested for the quality of the data deriving from interviews. Patton (2002) argued that interviews data might be disturbed by the interviewee's emotional state such as anger or anxiety. Other factors such as personal bias and politics might also affect the data generated. In addition, Murphy and Scott (2003) pointed out that the interviewee's awareness of the power difference between himself / herself and the academic researcher might also affect the whole interview process. Being aware of these factors, the researcher has to find strategies to lower the effect of these factors on the

quality of the data collected. Patton (2002) suggested the strategy of interviewing the same population on different occasions. In addition many researchers suggested triangulation as one of the best research strategies that a researcher might use to improve the validity of the results. Issues related to the quality of the research data in this study are going to be fully discussed in the Research Methodology chapter.

In addition to interviews, inventories have been widely used to investigate the students' conceptions of and approaches to learning. These inventories are standardized questionnaires that developed as a result of research on the students' approaches to learning, have been criticized for the quantitative aspect of the method. Murphy and Scott (2003) criticized this method for its simplicity in dealing with the complexities of the students' experience of learning. The various inventories and questionnaires developed tend to treat approaches to learning as stable and fail to account for the diversity that individual students might approach the various tasks in different contexts and disciplines. One important issue that was raised in the literature is related to the analysis of the research which is particularly not easy as Martin et al (1997: 21) put it:

It is exceptionally difficult to report findings from this type of research in a fully convincing manner. To provide a full description of the categories identified necessitates the presentation of the whole range of quotations covering the delimiting instances. Only in extensive research reports is this possible.

### **1.5- Phenomenography:**

Phenomenography developed from the work undertaken by Marton, Saljo, Dahlgren, and Svensson in the mid 1970's at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. These researchers conducted a study (1976) in which he sought to



explain the various ways students experience their learning departing therefore from the traditional cognitive research approaches that seek to explain rather than understand people's experiences of the world.

Phenomenography typically depicts the variety in people's understanding of the same phenomenon; it has been defined by Marton (2015: 123) as about "*the different meanings of the same things, or about ways of seeing, experiencing, and conceptualizing them, where things refer to anything that might have different meanings*". According to Marton (1993, 2015) different meanings can be understood by different people when they solve problems, see, feel, or move, all of which are part of the experience of that particular phenomenon. Phenomenography was therefore taken as alternative educational research perspective to the critical-realism in approaching the learners' experience of learning in higher education, launched by the Gothenburg seminal study. In Marton's view (1981), while critical-realism focuses on making statements about reality based on the researcher's external observations and interpretation, phenomenography tends to focus on the learners' conceptualization of reality based on their own statements. The first research perspective investigates the learning experiences from the first-order, which is the researchers' external observation view, while the second one investigates learning from the inside perspective, which is the learners' view. The implication of the second-order perspective on phenomenographic research practice is explored in the next section.

### **1.5.1- Phenomenography as a Non-Dualistic Research Perspective:**

Marton (1981) makes a difference between the first- and second- orders in research on students learning to clearly articulate the objective and the focus of phenomenography. In the first-order research the research seeks to describe and understand the phenomenon under investigation, while in the

second-order research, for example phenomenography, the researcher's focus is the learners' views about these phenomena.

Phenomenography is an educational research method that takes a non-dualistic second-order perspective as asserted by Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 10):

“Aspects of the students' experience of learning and the theoretical ideas are derived from a phenomenographic perspective. Essentially, these ideas suggest that the world, as experienced, is non-dualistic”.

The non-dualistic research perspective considers that the person and the world that is experiencing are not independent of each other; they are rather interrelated and constitute one experience. Said differently, the object experienced, which is the phenomenon being experienced, does not exist independently from the subject, or the viewer of the phenomenon. In relation to this Marton (1994: 20) pointed out that:

Phenomenography addresses the question of what a phenomenon looks like as much as how it is seen. An experience is seen as an internal relationship between the subject and the object or the person and the phenomenon.

Similarly, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) pointed out that from a phenomenographic perspective, the world of learning is an experienced world” (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999:10), in which there is a strong inevitable relationship between the object being experienced and the subject experiencing the world. Therefore, the non-dualistic perspective assumes that the experience is a complex phenomenon, which involves an interaction between the outer world experienced and the inner world of the individual. Contrary to this non-dualistic research perspective, the dualistic research

perspective, which assumes that the world being experienced is independent from the individual's inner world.

### **1.5.2- Philosophical Underpinnings of Phenomenography:**

Phenomenography draws on the social-constructivist philosophy, one of the main trends in the meta-cognitive psychology. The social-constructivist theory, as its name indicates, emphasizes two essentially related elements: the individually constructed knowledge and the social elements of the learning process.

The main assumption in the social-constructivist theory is the view that knowledge is constructed by the individual. Said differently, it is an internal activity taking place when newly acquired knowledge interacts with what his/her prior learning experience. This is based on the idea that the elements external to the learner, such as curriculum changes and adjusted teaching methods might affect the learner only indirectly (Goodyear, 2002), but do not lead to a conceptual change of the learner (Biggs, 1999). The crucial part of learning is not external to the learner in that not only knowledge is constructed individually but also the way in which the learning tasks are interpreted is individual. At this point a distinction has to be made by a 'task' and an 'activity'. Ellis (2007: 2) argued that *"a task is the work prescribed by the teacher and activity is what students actually do"*. Differences in the learning outcomes takes place when the task is interpreted by the student and turns out into a learning activity: it is this process of interpreting tasks into activities that knowledge is conducted and conceptual change may occur (Biggs, 1999). Indeed, the central idea of social-constructivism and phenomenography is that individual learners cannot be said to have had the same learning activity simply because they went through the same learning situation (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1988; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999)

This leads us to evoke the second crucial element in this theory which is the 'social' element (Richardson, 1994). This element implies that the individual's interpretation of the tasks takes place when his previously acquired learning experiences interact with the knowledge conveyed by the learning task (Biggs, 1999). From the social-constructivist point of view learning, a learning activity is not only individual but also local and contextually-sensitive (Entwistle, 1997, Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Furthermore, the social-constructivist theory is based on the premise that the subject, i.e, the individual learner, and the object of learning do not exist independently, implying a non-dualistic point of view of researching learning.

This social-constructivist theory has formed a strong theoretical framework for phenomenography. In the section which follows, we will look at the way phenomenography shaped a research paradigm to investigate the students' learning from the social-constructivist point of view.

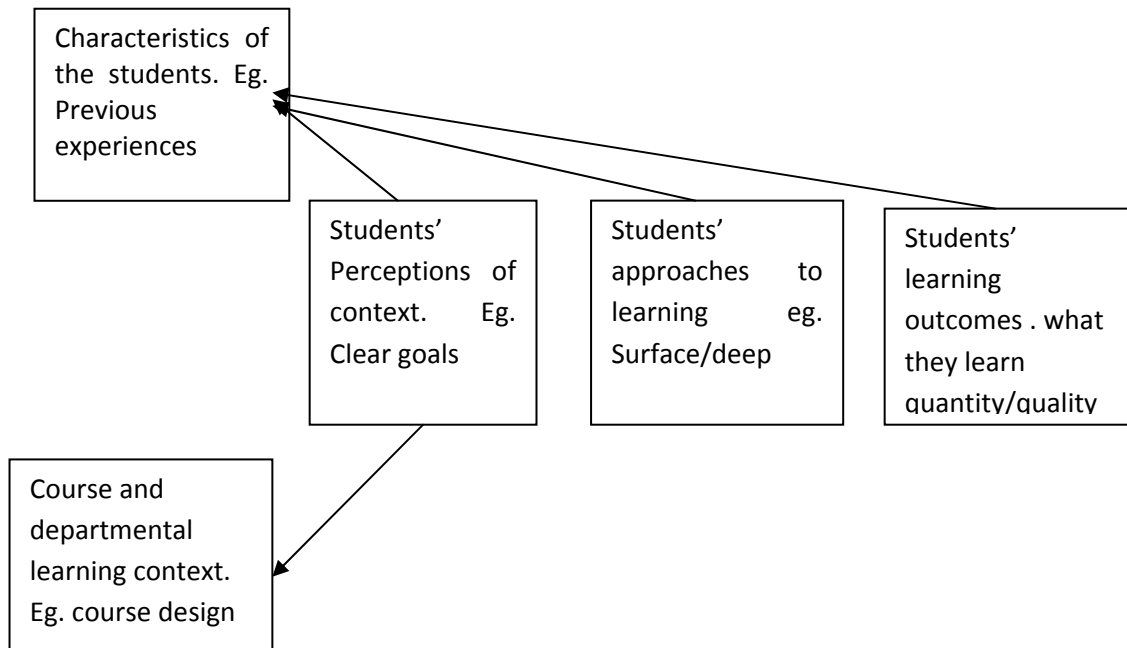
### **1.5.3- Investigating Student Learning from a Phenomenographic Research Perspective:**

From a phenomenographic research perspective, it is the learning activity that has to be the focus of both teaching and research (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Entwistle, 1997). Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 11) argued that "*good learning involves a focus on the meaning and understanding of the material students are studying*". The underlying assumption of such research is that all students experience the learning tasks and teaching context in different ways.

In order to obtain a deep understanding of the teaching-learning context, it is essential to consider this variety in experiencing it. In order to achieve such an understanding in higher education, Biggs (1989, 1999) suggested the 3Ps model, which stands for Presage, Process, and product, to consider learning from a phenomenographic research perspective. Prosser

and Trigwell (1999) provided an adapted and simplified illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure1.1: Presage- Process- Product Model of Student Learning(taken from Prosser and Trigwell, 1999: 16)**



In this model, learning is recognized a complex activity in which various factors interact; it is depicted as a set of systems that interact in a recursive way. In addition, the learning outcomes, which is part of the mast P, is clearly affected by many factors in both the Pressage and the Process phases of this learning activity. Learning outcomes have been traditionally depicted as being the result of the students' personal traits and strategies. In this model, they are attributed to many factors, including the students' prior-experience of learning, their learning conceptions and approaches. Learning is seen as an interaction between the students' prior experiences and the learning and

teaching context. The students' perceptions of their context are related to the way the students approach their studies. Following this model, the adopted learning approach is related to the quality of their learning outcomes (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

This model depicts learning as a complex activity, yet it makes it less complicated to investigate learning. For this reason, it has been considered as a frame of reference to several phenomenographic studies of students learning experience. Given its flexibility it has been adopted for to guide the present study. These three main Ps are directly targeted in this study, which investigates both the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics along with their learning conceptions and approaches to study Linguistics using a set of text-based tasks. In addition to these aspects, the learning outcomes are taken into consideration. By learning outcomes, we are not referring to the quantitative outcomes of learning but rather to those understandings and meanings that the students give to the study of Linguistics (Biggs, 1999).

In addition to the 3Ps model, the phenomenographic studies typically go through a set of steps, which are going to be explained in the remaining of this section.

**i) Focus of the Study:** The aim of phenomenography is not to understand a phenomenon, but instead, it seeks to understand the various ways in which different individuals understand the same phenomenon. The second-order and non-dualistic perspectives implies asking second-order questions that target the learners conceptions of a given learning phenomena, along with their approaches adopted to achieve that specific understanding. Asking the right questions that acknowledge the variation in the learners' understanding is crucial for a good conduct of any phenomenographic study. Table 1 presents the difference between first- and second-order research issues:

**Table 1.1: First- and Second Order Perspectives on the Same Phenomenon, Taken from Daniel et al (2016)**

	<b>First-Order perspective</b>	<b>Second-order perspective</b>
<b>Question</b>	Why do some people succeed better than others?	What do people think about why some children succeed better than others?
<b>Possible answer</b>	The difference in success in school mainly reflect inherited differences in intelligence.	There are some people who think that the difference in school mainly reflect inherited differences I school

Behind these second-order question is the aim to understand the phenomenon itself and assumption that people hold various views of the same phenomena.

**ii) Phenomenographic Data Collection:** Given the second-order perspective adopted in phenomenography, the researcher typically considers the learners' own descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, in terms of research tools, the semi-interviews become the first elicitation technique used in any phenomenographic study (Marton, 1993; Entwistle, 1997).

The interviews should be designed to encourage the participants to clearly describe their thoughts, views and the meanings that they attach to the phenomenon under investigation. To this aim, any phenomenographic interview should contain two types of questions: open questions and follow-up questions. The open questions are used to encourage the participant to reflect and voice his/her thoughts about the phenomenon investigated. A typical phenomenographic open question would be: What do you understand by learning/ mathematics/ exams? Follow-up questions are yet needed to ask the participant to further elaborate on his initial answer, for instance, asking the participant to illustrate the point or to clarify an idea that light reflect his/her conception.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, any other data collection technique that encourages the learners to express their views, thoughts and understanding of the investigated phenomena can be used in phenomenography. One of these research tools are the open-ended questions, where the participant voices his/her own conceptions of a particular phenomenon in a written way. Even though this technique does not allow the researcher to probe the participant for further explanations and elaboration, it has been reported to be quite effective in setting the participant to reflect in a deeper way (Entwistle, 1997). This technique is powerful if combined with the phenomenographic interviews to yield for the variety in conceiving phenomena.

**iii) Phenomenographic Data Analysis:** The interviews and open-ended questions data should be transcribed verbatim and are analyzed to depict the variety but also the similarities among the population. This implies a consideration of each individual views within a given context and in response to a specific situation. Likewise, the interviewees' answers should be considered collectively to enable the researcher to depict the variety within that group of participants. According to Akerlind (2005), the research should have all the transcripts ready before starting the thematic analysis. In analyzing the data, the researcher should take account of two main aspects namely the 'referential' and the 'structural' aspects, also referred to as the 'what' and 'why' aspects of learning. Both the referential and structural aspects of the learning experience are taken as a frame of reference in all of the studies reviewed in this chapter.

The findings of this analysis in phenomenography are organized in what is referred to the 'outcome space', which is the final step in the phenomenographic investigation before interpreting the data.

**iv) Phenomenographic Findings:** The findings of any phenomenographic study are a set of logically-related categories of description that reflect



qualitatively various ways of understanding or approaching a particular phenomenon. Moreover, these categories of description are necessarily hierarchically related from the least to the most sophisticated category (Marton, 1993). This is referred to as the outcome space. These categories consist of a description of the category and a set of features of awareness reflected by the conception. These are referred to as either themes of expanding awareness or features of awareness. Concerning the categories of description for the learning approaches, contain a description of the category, the strategies and the motives behind the choice of that strategy, these are referred to in Entwistle framework as the focus of attention and intention.

The outcome space in phenomenography is as crucial as forming the categories of description, it shows not only the variety but also the features that link one category to another in a hierarchical way. This step allows the researcher to interpret the complex data.

### **Conclusion:**

Our purpose in this chapter has been to provide a clear background for the reader to be able to understand the design, conduct, analysis and the interpretation of the data. The theoretical and research data has been presented according to well-recognized concepts or research perspectives; at the same time, clarifying the focus of the present research in relation to the issues emerging from the literature on students' learning. Research on learning conceptions and approaches has been placed within their philosophical, theoretical and research perspectives.

Furthermore, it has been argued that the students' learning research has contributed to our understanding of how students experience learning and conceptualize learning across disciplines and cultures. Yet, the findings are described as diversified and not easy to manage (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser

and Trigwell, 1999). It has been inferred that one of the main reasons for the confusion that students' learning research often creates is due to the fact that it is still in progression and a general framework has not been established yet in the literature, especially given the scarcity of phenomenographic studies in many contexts. Indeed, it has also been observed from the literature review that there is a scarcity of research exploring university students' learning in the southern Mediterranean countries.

Some of the main issues inferred from the review of the literature in relation to the experience of learning literature, which are relevant to this study, are summarized as follows:

- Research findings come essentially from either Western countries or from comparison between Western and Asian students.
- Research is mostly restricted to a few disciplines, mainly scientific. Human sciences are under-researched.
- Conceptions of learning are experienced in a limited number of categories that might be different across cultures and academic disciplines.
- Conceptions of learning are essentially context-related and findings of one study in a given learning context are practical only in relation to that particular research context and cannot be generalized.

As such, taking account of the previous research and relevant theories, a rationale for the research methodology underpinning this study has been theoretically established. In the next chapter, we will explore, describe and justify the design of the present research undertaken to meet the objectives of the present study.

# **Chapter Two**

## **Research Design and Procedure**

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#### **Introduction:**

Chapter Two presents the rationales for the decisions that shaped the whole research and the process in which this study was planned and carried out. For this purpose, four main areas are addressed in this chapter: the objectives of the study, including the research questions along with their justification. Then, the selection of the participants of the study is discussed before moving on to the presentation of the rationales of all the methodological decisions including the research method adopted for the study, the data collection tools and procedure. The data analysis method is also both clarified and justified. Finally, questions concerning ensuring the quality of the study are discussed.

#### **2.1- Rationale and Research Questions:**

The focus of this study is the differences in the ways individual students experience learning. In conformity with the literature on the students' learning conceptions and approaches, the term 'learning' in the present study is used interchangeably with the term 'studying', and so the learning experience is also referred to as the study experience throughout this study. To identify the various ways a group of people conceive one same phenomenon is the central aim of phenomenography, which is the approach adopted for the present study (Marton and Booth, 1997).

Marton and Booth (1997) argued that students do not experience learning in a vacuum; they experience the learning of something. This is because the experience of learning is subjective and highly context-related in the sense that the same student may hold different conceptions and adopt

different learning approaches depending on the subject of study, the course, the learning materials, and the teacher; all of these make what is referred to as the learning situation (Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 2015). From this perspective, the experience of learning in the present study is investigated in relation to linguistics.

The central theme for the present study is the understanding and meanings that characterize the students' experience of studying linguistics, which constitute the students' study conceptions. Fundamental to this theme is the idea that each individual student has his own unique conception of his/her own learning situation (Entwistle, 1997). This latter is defined as the interaction between the student and the context of learning "*including any other students' studying the same subject, the teacher and the milieu*" (Trigwell and Prosser, 1999: 16).

Research on the students' experience of learning entails also taking into consideration the students' study approaches along with the students study conceptions. For this reason, the present study does not focus on the students' conceptions exclusively, but also tries to relate these conceptions to the study approaches adopted by the same students.

In the present study we also emphasize the special role of the prior-experience of learning in shaping the students' learning conceptions and approaches. The students' experiences of learning are not constituted randomly, they are related to the prior-experiences; that is to say, their conceptions and approaches previously adopted in relation to the same subject of study and within the same context. This idea is emphasized in various phenomenographic models to study the students' experiences of learning, including (Biggs, 1978; Prosser et al, 1994; and Trigwell and Prosser, 1999). These researchers, among many others, argue that the way the students approach and conceive their present learning context is acutely

linked to the prior-conceptions and prior- approaches adopted in the same learning and teaching context.

Based on these arguments, it is crucial for this study to clarify the difference between the students' prior experience and understanding of linguistics and the experience evoked in the course of the present study, which both help us build an understanding of the students' experience of studying linguistics.

In order to investigate the issues discussed in the previous section, the present study addresses a set of research questions and sub-research questions in order to gradually develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the students experience the study of linguistics. The first set of research questions addresses the students' prior experience of studying linguistics, while the second addresses the students' experience of studying linguistics evoked in the course of the study. A third research question is meant to bring the understanding gained from the answers to the first and second research questions to develop a holistic understanding about the nature of the study of linguistics.

The first objective of this piece of research implies addressing the prior-conceptions of and prior-approaches to linguistics study. Research in different academic contexts has shown that the students' conceptions and understanding of learning is very much influenced by the kind of ideas from their prior-experiences of learning. This led many researchers such as Entwistle (1997), Marton and Saljo (1997), and Ramsden (2013) to explicitly argue that one cannot claim to have had a complete picture of the students' learning experience without having initially addressed their prior-experience of learning. This latter denotes the students' understanding of the ways in which the students experienced learning at the beginning of a new learning situation; a new learning situation could be a new academic year, a new concept in the course, a new activity, or a new course (Marton and Saljo,

1997). In the case of the present study, the focus is on the students' understanding of linguistics at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of license. This primary concern is addressed by the following research question and sub-research questions:

**RQ1: What prior-experience do 2<sup>nd</sup> year students have about the study of linguistics?**

*Sub RQ A: What prior-conceptions do the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the study of linguistics?*

*Sub RQ B: What prior-approaches do the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the study of linguistics?*

The investigation into the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches can provide crucial, yet not complete data about the way the students understand and approach their studies within the course of linguistics. This is a vital but only one step towards the understanding of the students' experience of studying linguistics. Learning conceptions and approaches have to be contextualized and so they need to be related to real learning and teaching events so in order to provide a context for the students to express their thoughts and understating of linguistics. As Marton (1986) argued, the students' statements have to be related to a specific course or learning activity; otherwise, their statements will remain vague and imprecise. For this reason, the second research question will be worded as follows:

**RQ2: What learning experience do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?**

**Sub RQ A:** What conceptions do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of linguistics?

**Sub RQ B:** What approaches do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of linguistics?

Implicit in these research questions is the aim of understanding the relationship between the various categories of description for both learning conceptions and approaches. It is vital in this study to understand not only the various ways the students conceive and approach the study of linguistics but also the potential relationship between the various ways of experiencing the study of linguistics. This will help proving us with a holistic and at the same time detailed picture of the experience of studying linguistics. Therefore, the prior-learning experience and the learning experience of studying linguistics have to be brought together in order to be able to understand the nature of studying Linguistics. The idea of focusing on 'the nature' of educational phenomena, including teaching learning, academic disciplines, and even particular disciplinary concepts, is not uncommon in phenomenography. This focus grows from a number of studies that suggest that the most effective way of developing teaching and learning is by developing the conceptual understanding of 'the nature' of teaching and learning phenomena instead of developing teaching methods, strategies, and skills (Akerlind 2003; 2008; Marton and Booth, 1997; Marton and Ramsden, 1992; Prosser and Trigwell, 1997). Following these arguments, our 3<sup>rd</sup> objective in the present study is to identify the nature of linguistic studies in the context of the present study. Hence, the 3<sup>rd</sup> research question is the following:



### **RQ3: What does the students' study experience tell us about the nature of studying Linguistics?**

We turn next to discuss the design of the study starting with the sampling procedure and the setting of the present investigation.

#### **2.2- Sampling and Setting:**

The study was conducted in the department of English of the University of Algiers 2. The sample for this study was 40 undergraduate students all enrolled in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year. The participants were randomly selected from three different groups taught by the same teacher, who is also the researcher in the present study. As already mentioned, phenomenography attempts to capture the various ways a group of people experience one given phenomenon within the same context (Marton and Booth, 1997). In order to capture the various ways the students experience the study of linguistics, it was important that the participants had all to be 2<sup>nd</sup> year students and be taught by the same teacher.

Before selecting the final sample, information about the students' willingness to participate in the study was collected, and this was right from the beginning of the academic year 2015/2016. At this stage, all the students of the three groups were asked to participate, each group included over 50 students; but only 90 students accepted to participate in this initial stage. However, by the final stage, the participation of 40 students was taken into consideration. The selection of these students was based on the regular attendance of the students; the students whose attendance in the linguistics course was not regular could not be taken into consideration. In addition, given that this study is basically phenomenographic, 40 students is already such a large sample, it would have been rather unfeasible to recruit more than 40 students in this study.

Besides, given the nature of the study, which relied largely on interviews for data collection, it needed a commitment on the part of the students. Hence, they were informed that they were going to be asked to participate in two different sessions during their academic year. At the same time, it was important that their non/participation would not affect their grades.

### **2.3- Linguistics Course:**

This work is mainly concerned with the variations in the ways the students' learning experience. Based on the argument that the learners do not experience learning in a vacuum, but rather, he/she experiences learning of something in a specific context (Marton and Booth, 1997; Ramsden, 2015), it was necessary to relate this experience to a subject of study. Linguistics was identified as an appropriate context within which the experience of learning can be investigated for three main reasons.

First, Linguistics constitutes an essential field for the students' future studies in the Department of English; it is one of the major content modules in the curriculum of the English degree along with literature and civilization. It is taught in the first three years of under graduation with different labels depending on the aim of the course throughout the undergraduate learning experience. Prior to 2021, Linguistics was taught in the two first years of under-graduation as a subject in preparation for the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, during which the students specialize in either linguistics or literature and civilization. For this reason, this module received an important amount of attention on the part of the students who sought out an academic career in Linguistics and Didactics, and/ or teaching English as a foreign language.

Second, contrary to the other content modules, Linguistics is not familiar to the students' experience prior to university level. In other words, the students' experience of studying Linguistics starts at university, which

makes it a distinctive academic discipline in the experience of the undergraduate students in the Department of English. In the present study, it was decided to investigate the experience of studying Linguistics by 2<sup>nd</sup> year students, and so the prior-experience of studying this subject started at university. In their 1<sup>st</sup> year, the module of Linguistics is labeled Basic Concepts of Linguistics, it presents an introduction to the major concepts of linguistics as a science and the main levels and branches of linguistics (see Appendix 1). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the curriculum, Linguistics is labeled 'Theories of Linguistics'; it is an introductory course to the main schools of Linguistics that aims at developing the students' understanding of the concepts and principles of the main European and American linguistic theories (see Appendix 2).

In addition, Linguistics is a field that falls within the expertise of the researcher. Being a teacher of Linguistics, it would be suitable to stay within the area of my skill and experience while addressing students learning issues. In exploring the experience of learning from an educational research perspective, the teacher-researchers might be more genuinely interested in the students' learning experience if the focus of research is directed at issues within their teaching context.

In what follows is a thorough discussion of the research mythology, including the frameworks that guided the design and conduct of this phenomenographic investigation.

#### **2.4- Research Methodology:**

The choice of the research method is determined as much by the researcher's objectives and assumptions of the nature of the phenomena explored as by the dominant research traditions. In line with objectives of the present research previously discussed, phenomenography is the most appropriate methodology for this research. Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 57) maintained that:

Phenomenography is the empirical study of a limited number of qualitatively different ways in which we experience, conceptualize, understand, perceive, apprehend etc (...) various phenomena and aspects of the world around us

Phenomenography is concerned with the qualitatively various ways through which individuals experience a specific phenomenon. These qualitative variations are referred to as 'categories of description' that cannot be significant unless they enter into a logical and hierarchical relationship with each other in what is called the 'outcome space' (Marton, 1981, 1994; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

The choice of phenomenography has three main implications all of which were carefully taken into consideration in the present study as will be seen in the selection of the data collection instruments and procedure. First, it implies dealing with issues related to learning approaches and conceptions and students' interpretation of their learning situations. Second, it involves essentially a qualitative research design; experimental treatment of the issues in this study would not provide the researcher with the desired data. The third main implication is the need to recognize the students as the main source of data. Matron et al (1997) maintained that the students' interpretation of reality is not just different from the teachers' and the researchers', but is also 'unique'. Indeed, Phenomenography is based on the idea that every individual has a personal conceptual understanding of his own experiences. Phenomenographers see people and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings, and understanding as primary data sources. Nevertheless, the researcher adopting phenomenographic approach has a crucial role that is not limited simply to reporting the participants' accounts of their world, but also to interpret it. This type of interpretive inquiry focuses on the participants' views and personal understanding, which implies that the objective of the researcher should not be confirming or disconfirming pre-

established hypotheses. From the phenomenographic point of view, the researcher has to be prepared to essentially explore the issues investigated from the participants' perspectives.

Besides, according to the model illustrated in figure 2.1, the focus is not on 'how much' knowledge the students have, but rather 'what knowledge' and understanding of the subject matter have been developed by the students themselves. This is quite compatible with the assumptions underpinning the present research which were discussed in the research methodology section of this chapter. Indeed, 'qualitative learning outcomes in this model refer to the students' learning conceptions and approaches that they came out with after a teaching and learning experience.

Following these arguments, it was necessary to address first the students' prior conceptions and approaches to study linguistics. That was the aim of Stage 1 of the study. Two main arguments justify the importance of this stage. The first is that the students do not come into the classroom as 'blank slates' when they start a given subject at university; rather, it is argued that their prior experience of learning greatly impacts their conceptual understanding (Marton, 1986; Trigwell, 2000). Second, research suggests that the students start their higher education courses in the beginning of an academic year not only with various degrees of knowledge of the subject matter, but also with qualitatively various conceptual understanding of the key concepts in that subject matter (Biggs and Tang, 1999; Entwistle, 1997).

Therefore, collecting data about the students' prior conceptions of and approaches to study linguistics is necessary; yet not enough to draw conclusions about the students' experience of learning. The framework set for data collection procedure suggests that the second step is to collect data about the various ways conceive and approach the study of linguistics when they go through the same learning situation, dealing with the same materials and taught by the same teacher. As already explained, the students' learning

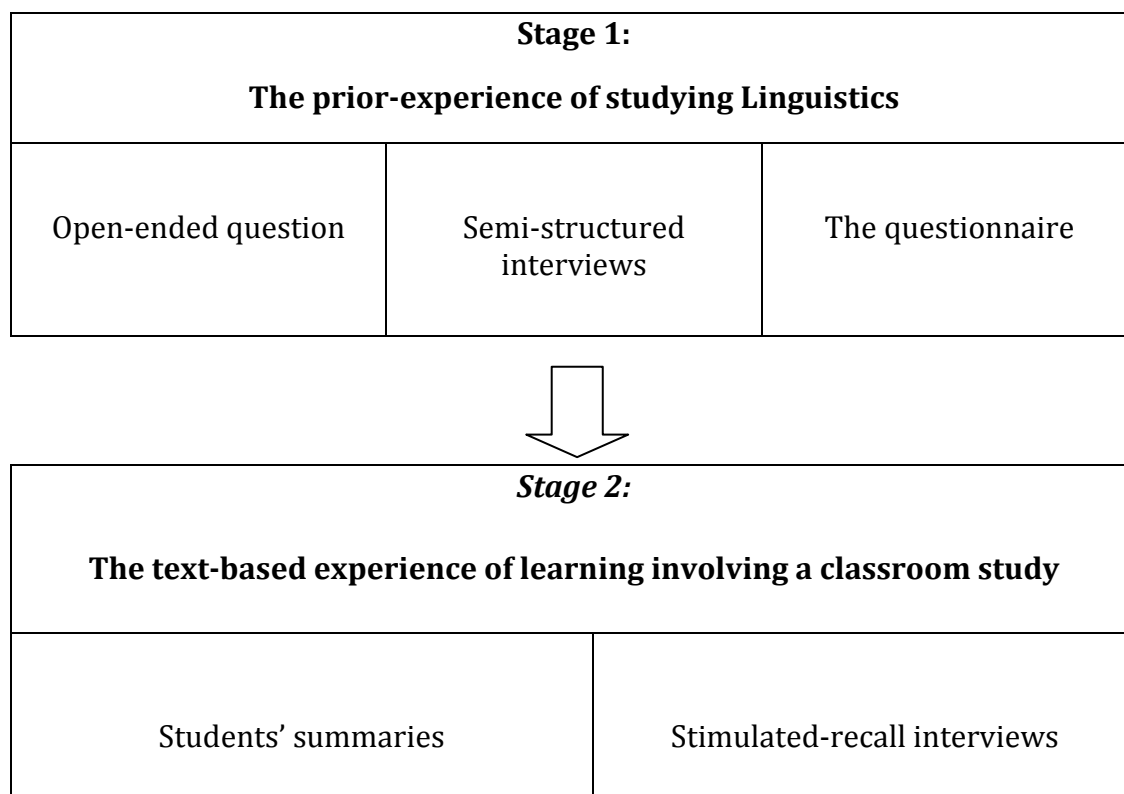
conceptions and approaches are to be considered as the qualitative learning outcomes in this study.

### **2.5- Data Collection Instruments:**

The research questions were investigated using five research instruments: a questionnaire, an open-ended question, two interviews, and students' summaries. The generation of the students' summaries implied the use of learning and teaching materials in the classroom, namely texts and activities. The density of the data and the nature of the study implied the implementation of these research instruments into two different stages referred to in this study as Stage 1 (Sg1) and Stage 2 (Sg2) of the study. This framework is both explained and justified in (section 2.5) of this chapter. In order to further clarify these choices, the research instruments used in this study are illustrated in Figure 2.1 according to whether they were implemented in Sge1 or Sge 2 of the study.

As can be seen in Figure 1, this study was largely based on interviews. Having adopted phenomenography in this study, it seems quite adequate to use interviews as the main research instrument for collecting data. In fact, interviews in the present research were the main research tool in both Sge 1 and Sge2 of this study, obtaining therefore rich data both in the beginning and the closing stages of this investigation. Nevertheless, other research instruments were equally used to meet the triangulation principle in this research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These research instruments included an open-ended question, students' summaries, and a questionnaire. All of these data collection tools are commonly used and recommended by phenomenographers researcher in education.

**Figure 2.1: Data Collection Tools**



In what follows is a discussion of the research instruments just illustrated in Figure 2, which will be presented depending on whether they were implemented in Sge 1 or Sge 2 of the study.

**2.5.1- Data Collection Instruments Used in Sge 1 of the Study:**

As already stated, Sge1 was meant to collect data about the students' approaches to study Linguistics as well as the conceptions they held about Linguistics as a subject matter in the beginning of their second year. In other words, it involves collecting data about the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics. Data collection was conducted using three research instruments, which were implemented in this order: an open-ended question, asemi-structured interview and a questionnaire, each of which are explored in next sub-sections.

### **2.5.1.1- Open-Ended Question:**

#### **(i) Rationale:**

The study began with researching the nature of the conceptions of learning that the students bring to their second year experience of linguistics using an open-ended question. Having opted for phenomenography, obtaining data from the students' direct expression was essential.

The open-ended question has to be distinguished from a questionnaire with a set of open-ended questions (Lucas, 2009). It is a tool that the researcher uses with students to let them freely express themselves in relation to a given issue (Marton and Saljo, 1991; Entwistle, 1997; Lucas, 2009). It is used commonly in phenomenography to invite the student to write his personal reflections in relation to the phenomena under investigation. Instead of providing the students with a questionnaire with a set of open-ended questions, the for-runners of Phenomenography argued that administering one open-ended question is likely to generate maximum of reflections and thoughts on the part of the learner than it would be with a questionnaire (Entwistle, 1997; Trigwell, 2000). Another advantage of the use of the open-ended question is educational research in general and in the present research in particular is that it could be administered as a normal learning activity in the classroom in a less formal atmosphere; this wouldn't give the students the impression of being formally questioned by their teacher, and so was likely to generate data in a more relaxing situation.

Indeed, the use of the open-ended question has been commonly used in studies seeking to investigate the students' experience of learning. To mention some, Prosser *etal*(1996) and Dahlgren (1997). In both studies, the open-ended questions proved to be crucial in helping the students to express their understanding, and it was indeed very useful for the researchers to identify the categories of descriptions.



**(ii) Description:**

It was decided that the present research would open with the administration of this open-ended question that was carefully worded as follows:

***“Reflecting on your previous learning experience of studying linguistics, describe what you understand by linguistics”.***

The students completed the task individually on the spot in the classroom, and were given 45 minutes to write their responses. This time allotted for this task was decided after 2 trials before the actual implementation of this open-ended question (See appendix 3). As will be seen in the pilot study, the students did not need more than 45 minutes to complete this written task. In addition, the reason why the students were asked to answer this open-ended question on in the classroom was to capture the very first spontaneous responses that come to the mind of the students.

**2.5.1.2- Semi-Structured Interview:**

**(i) Rationale:**

Having adopted phenomenography, the choice of interviews as the main research tool to generate data in this study is inevitable. Although phenomenographic data can be generated from various research tools, the semi-structured interviews data remains the most appropriate instrument in phenomenographic data collection.

Interview studies have also been encouraged by pioneering studies in the field of students’ learning experience in higher education, which have showed how useful were the interviews in collecting invaluable data from the population. Having reviewed the major phenomenographic studies on the student experience (these will be discussed in Chapter One), interviews have been noticed to be not only systematically used but also recommended by the

researchers as a major source of data to collect information about the participants' experiences. To mention some, Saljo (1979), Marton et al (1993), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), Crawford et al (1994), Prosser and Webb (1994).

On the importance of this research method, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argued that people's experiences are not directly accessible for the researcher and so they need to be voiced by the participants. Researchers in educational field in particular and social sciences in general, resort to interviews because they cannot observe feelings, thoughts or intentions of people. In addition, they cannot observe how people attach meaning to their experiences and actions (Patton, 2002). Therefore, in the present research, interviews were chosen to understand how the students interpret their experiences of learning.

As for the type of the interviews, a semi-structured interview was chosen. It involved the use of an agenda, also referred to as a schedule, but at the same time inviting them to express views and provide descriptions from their points of view. Moreover, semi-structured interviews require the design of a set of questions around specific themes. This allowed to compare the interviewees' answers thematically. In addition, in the pilot study, open-ended interviews proved to be less effective than semi-structured interviews in collecting the desired information, and so they had to be abandoned from the beginning.

It should be recognized that interviews, like any other research method, are not without limitations. The interviews are often criticized as limited in that they provide the researcher information about phenomena only from the participants' perspectives. In other words the 'truthfulness' of the data may be questioned. However, having opted for phenomenography, the main concern of the study was to collect data about how the participants see their reality, not how they should see it. In other words, the aim is not to collect 'true'

information, but rather, how the participants think of their learning situation. This type of data is commonly recognized in Phenomenography as 'unique', 'individual', and 'subjective' (Ramsden, 2010; 2013; 2015). Actually, this is what makes the experience of learning diversified, varied, and complex: it is this variation in conceiving of the same learning situation which counts in phenomenographic studies, and deliberately rejected or overlooked in positivist studies.

In relation to this, Richardson (1996) strongly argued that research methods other than interviews cannot 'validly' tell us about the students' conceptions of their own reality. Instead, what the qualitative interpretive researcher has to control is how systematic the responses are to make informed conclusions and eventually pedagogical implications. For example, collecting information from the same population on different periods would tell us how consistent the information may be. Another way to ensure the validity of the data collected from interviews is triangulation. In this study, both measures have been adopted. The interviews are conducted in two different sessions with the same population. In addition, this study does not rely exclusively on interviews; other instruments are used along with interviews both to check the data and to provide the study with more diversified information.

Besides, given that the objectives of the research are related to subjective and personal topics such as learning conceptions and approaches, the research procedure is based on phenomenographic principles. This implied that the researcher does not expect the participants to provide 'true' information about reality, but rather, how he/she views this reality. This change of perspective in researching the students' learning was noticed when reviewing the related literature (to be submitted) and it was observed that this change in concepts of validity and reliability of studies came as an inevitable implication of a change in perspective (Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 2003,

2015). According to Entwistle (1997) understanding reality from the participant's perspectives reinforces 'ecological validity', an important concept in phenomenographic research to be discussed in the Review of the Literature chapter, which has been long neglected in educational research. Issues related to the validity and credibility of the research are discussed later in this chapter.

### **(ii) Construction of the Semi-Structured Interview:**

This interview that was used in Sge 1 of the study consisted of 8 main questions all designed around two major themes: the students' conceptions of and approaches adopted in their prior experience of studying Linguistics. To collect data about these themes, this interview was constructed following the what/how model of investigating the students' learning experience by Marton and Booth's (1993, 1997), also referred to as the structural/referential model. The 'what' dimension was meant to target the students' understanding and this would have indicated their learning conception. The 'how' dimension emphasized the students' ways of going about reading and tackling the learning activities, indicating therefore their learning approaches.

The questions are discussed depending on the intended dimension, what or how; but it should be recognized that the questions, being semi-structured, had to leave some freedom for the students to express their thoughts without restrictions or explicitly directing their responses to a given dimensions. In relation to this, Marton (1986: 46) asserts that: *"the dimensions they choose are an important source of data because they reveal an aspect of the individual's relevance structure"*

The discussion of interview questions starts with those designed to obtain information about the '**what**' dimension; that is to say the students' **prior conceptions:**

**Q1: Based on your previous experience of studying Linguistics in your 1<sup>st</sup> year, what do you understand by Linguistics?**

The interview had to start with this question that could lead the students directly into thinking about their prior understandings of linguistics. The participants had previously answered a similar question in a written form. This interview question was an opportunity to elaborate more on what they had written, although they were not explicitly asked to do so, at the same time checking the consistency of the data obtained from the two research instruments. The students' description of what linguistics might mean for them is indicative of the conceptions of this subject.

More elaboration and understanding of the way the students' conceive the course of their 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics was obtained through question 2, which explicitly invited the students' to describe in details the linguistics lectures. According to Marton and Saljo (1993) the students' description of a subject, activity, or phenomena is indicative of how complex his conception might be. It is typical of phenomenographers in education to ask the participants to describe the phenomenon under investigation to generate data about his/her conception (Entwistle, 1997). Hence question 2 was worded as follows:

**Q2: Can you describe your 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics lectures?**

The students' perceptions of difficulties and ways of dealing with them have always been associated with the adopted approaches and conceptions of learning. The students accounts of difficulties as being learning challenges is associated with a conception of learning as being part of personal development, while the students' description of the difficulties as being an external hindrance or dependent of the teachers, is rather negative and reflects the students passive role in their learning. To achieve this purpose the students were asked these two questions:

**Q3: Did you have any difficulties in understanding the 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics lectures?**

Part of the students' prior experience is their conceptions of what their teachers do in the classroom (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Their description of the teacher's activity might indicate the way they personally conceive the study that particular subject of study. Hence, it was important to ask the following question for more interesting details:

**Q4: What did your teacher typically do during these lectures?**

With regards to 'how' dimension or the students' **approaches** adopted in their prior experience of studying linguistics, they were basically asked a set of questions to enable the students to make further elaborations. For example, in the above set of questions related to the students' prior conceptions, the students were asked to describe their 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics course. Once the students describe what they understand by linguistics as well as the course content, they were invited to reflect on the way they dealt with the content of the lectures. Information about their intentions was implicitly sought also. These questions were formulated as follows:

**Q5: What did you typically do in the lectures as a student?**

**Q6: What did you mostly focus on during these lectures?**

These three questions were extremely important as they enabled the participants to describe the way they went about studying linguistics, the focus of their attention. The purpose was to generate data about the students' intentions to understand (deep approach) or reproducing the teachers' materials (surface approach). After having exemplified the link between the students' perceptions of their learning situation and their approach to learning, Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 64) argue that:

In a lecture, for example, some students may focus on those aspects of the lecture which are affording a surface approach to study, while others may focus on those aspects affording a deeper approach

In this quotation, the authors emphasize two important facts, the first is that the existence of a variation among the students as to the type of the approach they adopt in their university studies. The 2<sup>nd</sup> is related to the link between the students' approaches to learning and the views they hold about the content and knowledge gained in the lectures. In their interesting review of both qualitative and experimental studies in this field, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) concluded that the students that perceive the lectures as affording either deep or surface approach depending on the aspects of lecture they previously emphasized.

More details about the participants' approaches were also obtained from the typical methods they follow to prepare for their texts and exams. According to Saljo (1997) Entwistle et al (1997), the students' perceptions of the assessment demands and the way they prepare for their assessment in various subject-matters plays a major role in shaping their learning approaches. Thus it was important not to neglect this issue in learning and asked the students the following questions:

***Q7: How did you typically prepare for the linguistics tests and exams?***

***Q8: What did you mostly concentrate on when you prepared for the tests and exams?***

In the next section, we explore the questionnaire used the first stage of the study.

### **2.5.1.3- Questionnaire:**

#### **(i) Rationale:**

In the beginning of the study, the students were surveyed on their approaches to learning along deep, strategic and surface dimensions, using a short version of the questionnaire used in this study was adapted from a shortened version of Approaches to Studying Skills Inventory for (ASSIST) designed by Entwistle, McCune, and Tait (2013) to survey the learners' on their approaches along deep, strategic, and surface dimensions. ASSIST contains 32 items in total in three different sections (Appendix 1). These items are both described and justified later in this section. Moreover, as will be shown in this section, this inventory has been adapted in this study after critical analysis and trials. Before discussing the adaptations made, a justification for the choice of this research instrument is first provided.

The choice of this inventory was mainly motivated by the need to obtain more balanced data for this research. As already explained, the main data for this study derives from the in-depth interviews with the students in addition to the students' written accounts. Yet, combining this qualitative data with that deriving from the questionnaire would provide this research with more balanced evidence about the issues under investigation. This way, it is hoped to be able to meet the triangulation principle. In addition, the use of such inventories in phenomenographic studies is not uncommon; it is even recommended, especially that its original authors were themselves phenomenographers that developed this inventory based on their in-depth interviews studies.

As for the choice of this particular inventory, it was triggered by the fact that ASSIST explicitly addresses approaches to learning along with conceptions of learning: the two major themes researched in this study. Other inventories, such as Bigg's (2003) was widely adopted for research on the



students' experience of learning, but it is more about the students' perceptions of their learning situations than about approaches to learning. The aim of ASSIST in this study was to describe the students' learning in terms of their overall orientation towards deep, surface approach, or strategic, which is a mixed-learning approach. As already stated, these study orientations have a direct relationship with the students' *conceptions of learning* and *teaching preferences*, which are both an important part of ASSIST. For example, if the students show an existing tendency towards a *surface approach*, this would suggest that the students conceive learning as being a mere accumulation of knowledge and perceive the learning tasks as being imposed on them. They also appear to be involved in university studies without reflection on the purpose and with ineffective learning strategies. Overall, the students adopting this approach (surface) would appear to show little autonomy in their learning. On the other hand, if the students exhibit a *deep orientation*, this would indicate the students aim to understand ideas and seek meaning, and tend to relate new ideas to the knowledge they already have (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). This data is to be completed by another students' questionnaire along with interviews to achieve the triangulation purpose (to be explained in another section).

Furthermore, the choice of this instrument has been motivated by the many studies that used this inventory in various contexts. As explained in the rationale of this study, little research evidence exists in the literature on the approaches to learning adopted by the Algerian students. Despite the fact that the construct of approaches to learning is relatively new, it has been widely investigated in different contexts, in particular, western and Asian contexts. Being interested in the learning experience of Algerian university students, one cannot simply rely on studies on approaches to learning of European or Asiatic cultures. Richardson (2010) states that research constructs, such as learning approaches and conceptions can be interpreted differently across cultures and disciplines as they are by nature context-related.

Having discussed the rationale for the choice ASSIT, we shall turn now to the description of the parts along with a justification of the inventory sections and items. As already stated, this inventory was not directly copied from the original version, as will be observed; it has gone through reflected adaptations to suit both the context and objectives of our study after it has been trialed. In what follows is a rationale of the inventory items and then the preparation of ASSIST in which changes to the original version are justified.

### **(ii) Description of the Questionnaire Sections and Items:**

The Approaches to Studying Skills Inventory (ASSIT) has evolved over the years and now is available in different forms; of these forms are the long 52-items version of ASSIST and a shorter 32-items version. The latter is the version adopted in the present study. This 32-items version was chosen for this study instead of the 52-items one, because the objective was to obtain a maximum of response rate. The intention was to administer a questionnaire which does not take more than 10 minutes to complete, especially that the present study involved a the administration of a number of instruments with the same participants to triangulate the data.

In Prosser and Trigwell's (1999) and Biggs' (2003) models to understand learning experience, there is a clear recognition of connection between approaches to learning and the students' conceptions of learning and teaching. Understanding one of these aspects implies a consideration of the others. Hence, there are three interrelated sections to the inventory, which are also preceded by a few questions about the student's personal and educational background. The rationale of the items in all these sections is the objective of the following sub-sections.

Before proceeding into the description of the various items of this questionnaire, it should be reminded that the authors of this questionnaire

used the term 'learning' instead of 'studying' throughout the questionnaire to mean the same thing, actually, they used the two terms interchangeably since the questionnaire the term 'studying' is used in the title of the questionnaire, while the term 'learning' is used in the items of the questionnaire.

- ***Background information:***

The questionnaire starts with three background questions related to gender and age of the participants, and their studies at university. The subjects' names are not required as the collection of data was meant to be anonymous. This minimum background information is important as I am interested in identifying how varied the population is in terms of age and gender. It should be emphasized that our study does not look at the variety of the students' learning conceptions and approaches based on their age or gender differences. However, these two pieces of information were judged important in order to make interpretation of the findings in relation to this population. The issues under investigation are context-related and the findings need to be interpreted within that specific context (Richardson, 2010; Ramsden, 2013), refer systematically the significance of the findings in terms of age, gender and level of proficiency. Being interested in adult and university studies, large scale studies such as those of Gothenburg Project (Saljo: 1997) among others have long recognized that the approaches to learning along with conceptions of learning changed from one context to another and evolved over time.

***Section A: What is the aim of learning? (6 items)***

The inventory starts with a question that invites the students to reflect on the aim of learning at university. This question was meant to indicate the students' broad conceptions of learning, in other words, what they broadly believe learning at university to be; a deeper investigation of this question was done through the open-ended question and the semi-structured interview scheduled during Sge 1 of the present study. This question is

important because the students' approaches to learning depend on what the students believe learning to be (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, Entwistle, 1997, Ramsden, 2010; Biggs, 2003).

The authors of ASSIST largely relied on the phenomenographic studies on university students', precisely those carried out by Marton and Saljo (1987) and Marton and Biggs (1991). Based on the evidence in these studies, the students' conceptions of learning are closely related to their intentions; indeed, the factors that encourage the students to adopt a surface approach arises from the **intention** to complete the task of learning a particular subject matter with minimum effort and reflects a view of learning as:

- Memorization of information presented in the lectures, thinking that recalling facts is adequate in higher education studies. Here there is a misunderstanding of the requirement of qualitative academic achievement.
- Acquisition of fragmented facts and information without looking at ways in which they link with each other. This reflects the student's inability to understand the taught materials at a deep level.
- Achieving high scores and obtaining a university degree. This reflects an intention only to achieve minimal pass.

The above views of learning are related to **surface approach** because they reflect a conception of learning as reproducing knowledge. The questionnaire items used to identify this conception are:

- a) *The aim of learning is to memorize information taught in the course.*
- b) *The aim of learning is to acquire facts and information to build more knowledge about the subject matter.*
- c) *The aim of learning is to achieve high scores to get a degree.*

However, the students are more likely to adopt a **deep approach** to learning if they **conceive** learning as rather a personal change and development through. This implies a view of learning as:

- Focus of underlying meaning of the information presented during the course and how it can be successfully applicable in real life.
- Ability to relate facts and information in a meaningful way.
- Interest in depth of learning rather than quantity and coverage.

This conception of learning as involving personal understanding and personal development is investigated in the questionnaire through four items:

- d) *The aim of learning is to prepare the students for professional life.*
- e) *The aim of learning is to understand the course content and be able to use in real life.*
- f) *The aim of learning is to develop one's personality.*

Although the authors of the inventory consider this part as optional and can be omitted, I believe it is important for our study. The objective is using this inventory in this study is not simply intended to describe the students' approaches and orientations to leaning but also to understand the relationship between conceptions of learning and approaches to learning. In relation to this, Beaty, Graham, and Morgan (1997: 72), drawing on their widely cited interview study, stated that "*In understanding student learning, we need to look at the interaction between orientation, approach, and conceptions*".

- **Sections B: Approaches to Studying (18 items)**

It is the main part of ASSIST which can be administered independently from the other two sections if the researcher is interested exclusively in having a broad idea of the students' adopted learning approaches. As indicated in the inventory title, it consists of 18 items that are designed around the constructs of **deep**, **surface**, and **strategic** approaches to learning (more information

about the theoretical background is provided in the review of the literature). These constructs have emerged from qualitative research suggesting that students at university reflect a limited number of approaches, also called orientations. An approach to learning is a description of the way the students organize his studies in a given context. Ramsden (2013) explains that an approach to leaning is not inherent; it rather changes from one context to another and evolves over time.

As for the items, this section contains 18 items organized around three dimensions: deep, surface and strategic approaches to learning, each of which has 6 items, which makes the total of 18 items. The students were asked to choose one of the following: 5= strongly agree, 4=agree, 3= neutral or undecided, 2= disagree, and 1= strongly disagree.

- The deep approach was investigated through items 2, 6, 10, 12, 15, and 17.
- The surface approach was investigated through items 1, 4, 8, 14, 16, and 18.
- The strategic approach was investigated though items 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13.

In what follows are the lists the items organized according to the approach they describe:

➤ **Deep approach (DA)** is reflected in the students' motivation to understand the concepts as well as the relationship between them. It is characterized by the students seeking meaning and generally results in a deep level of understanding. Below are questionnaire items (Section B) that are used to describe the students' orientations as being deep:

- *(Item 2) When I'm reading handouts, extracts and texts selected by the teacher, or my own notes, I try to find out for myself exactly what the teacher means.*

- *(item 6) Before tackling a classroom activity or homework I first try to think about the purpose behind it.*
- *(item 10) When I'm working on a new topic presented by the teacher for the first time, I try to think about how all the ideas fit together.*
- *(item 12) Often I find myself questioning things I hear in the lectures or read in related books or handouts.*
- *(item 15) Ideas in lectures, handouts or related books and articles often make me constantly think about myself.*
- *(item 17) When I read outside the classroom, I examine details carefully to see how they can fit with what the lecturer explains.*

➤ **Surface approach (SA)** describes the student's intention to complete the learning tasks with little personal engagement and interest. The learning situation is regarded as an imposed worthless activity and is related to classroom routine. The preferred strategy is memorization of facts that are meaningless for the student. The adoption of this approach results in very poor conceptual understanding of the subject-matter. The questionnaire is to identify this approach through the items below:

- *(item 1) I often have troubles in understanding things I am supposed to remember from my lectures.*
- *(item 4) Much of the work in the lectures is little interesting or relevant.*
- *(item 8) Much of what I'm studying makes little sense: it's like unrelated bits and pieces.*
- *(item 14) often I feel there is a big amount of material (handouts, notes, texts, homework) we're having to cope with*
- *(item 16) During the lectures, I'm not really sure what's important to note, so I try to take notes of all I can.*

- *(item 18) I'm often not quite sure about whether I'll be able to cope with studying in the Department of English.*

➤ Finally the **strategic or achievement approach (TA)** combines elements from the deep and surface approaches. It is introduced to describe the students' intention to achieve the highest possible grades by using well-organized study methods and effective time-management. The questionnaire items that are intended to indicate this approach are:

- *(item 3) I organized my study time carefully to make the best of it.*
- *(item 5) I work steadily throughout the semester, rather than leave it all until the last minute.*
- *(item 7) I'm pretty good at studying whenever I need to.*
- *(item 9) I put a lot of effort into studying because I have to do well.*
- *(item 11) I don't find it at all difficult to motivate myself.*
- *(item 13) I think I'm quite organized when it comes to revising for my exams.*

- **Section C: Preferences for different types of course and teaching (8 items)**

Approaches to learning are dependent not just on the conceptions of learning but also on the conceptions of teaching; that is, what the student believe the best teaching to be. This is the objective of the last section of the questionnaire. This close relationship between the three constructs justifies the importance of this section in the questionnaire.

As for the items selected in this section, they can be justified in the same way as the items in section A, which were related to conceptions of learning.



In other words, they are designed in close relation with the constructs of surface and deep approaches. According to Biggs (2003), when the students are more concerned with understanding the meaning of the information presented in their courses rather than memorization, showing a deep approach to learning, they tend to prefer teaching that encourages them to think for themselves. These students tend to prefer teaching which engages their interest and constantly challenge them. Alternatively the students adopting a surface approach to learning a particular course are expected to see the lecturer to assess independent facts without consideration for depth of the information. These students are more likely to expect the lecturer to be more concerned with coverage than with deep understanding. They also see the lecturer's main role is to provide as clear indications of not only what to learn, but also how to learn and what to assess. This is because a surface orientation to learning arises from the students' intention to learn with the least intellectual effort and academic engagement.

Following this rationale, the students are asked to indicate their personal preferences of the types of teaching first by carefully reading the items and then indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement in the list. The selected scale is 1=disagree, 2= disagree somewhat, 3= neutral or undecided. 4=agree somewhat, 5=agree. As for the items, they are as follows:

Students' preferences for teaching and courses that support understanding are related to deep approach and expressed as follows:

- *(item b) Lecturers who encourage us to think for ourselves and show us how they themselves think.*
- *(item c) Exams which allow me to show that I've thought about the course materials for myself.*
- *(item f) Courses where we're encouraged to read around the subject a lot for ourselves.*

- *(item g) Lecturers who challenge me to provide information which goes beyond the lectures.*

Besides, the students who tend to prefer teaching based on transmission of information and encouraging memorization of information are those recognized as having surface approach to learning. In the questionnaire, these items expressing this orientation are formulated as follows:

- *(item a) Lecturers who tell us exactly what to put down in our notes.*
- *(item d) Exams or tests which need only the materials provided in our lectures.*
- *(item e) Courses in which it's made very clear what information we need to learn and exactly what books provide us with such information.*
- *(item h) Lecturers who give definite facts and information which can easily be learned.*

### **2.5.2- Data Collection Instruments Used in Sge 2 of the Study:**

Sge2 of the study involved the use of learning and teaching materials based on texts followed by a summary task: the students were asked to produce short summaries of the texts read in the classroom. This procedure was applied in two lectures. Right after each lecture, a number of students were selected to participate in stimulated-recall interviews; the selected students were necessarily those that participated in stage 1. Thus, two important research tools were used to collect data in this stage: the students' summaries and the stimulated-recall interviews. This procedure in collecting data is what is referred to in the present research *the classroom study*. However, before discussing the two research tools involved in this stage, it is important to address the rationale and the design of the classroom study.

The choice of the classroom study was triggered by the need to provide a teaching/learning situation for the students so that they could articulate their conceptions of the learning situation being experienced, and at the same time giving the researcher an opportunity to collect data both inside and outside the classroom. According to Ramsden (2015), concepts such as learning conceptions and approaches are 'context driven' that are affected by the teaching-learning situation. In this case, data collected in the 1<sup>st</sup> stage was not enough to draw conclusions about the students adopted approaches and conceptions of learning. A deeper understanding of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students' experience of learning was needed.

The classroom study was non-experimental, i.e., it did not involve pre and post-testing, or any manipulation of any variables; in phenomenography this is called a study in "the natural setting" of the classroom (Entwistle et al, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). This choice was due the fact that the experimental study would have implied restrictions that may affect the students' conceptions of their learning situation. It also could have provided us with data about non-typical reactions of the participants which do not reflect their ordinary learning approaches and conceptions. Entwistle (1997) commented on non-experimental studies as very suitable for phenomenographers as they provide opportunity to draw data about the students' conceptions of everyday learning experiences about specific pieces of academic work in the classroom. It also allows the researcher to make interpretation of the findings which might have direct implications for the context of the study (Entwistle, 1997).

As for the construction of the classroom study, it was designed in a way that generates both written and verbal data from the participants; this is in order to make a balance with the type of data generated in sge 1, which also generated both written and verbal data. This stage of the study involved:

- Developing learning materials for the lectures.

- Collecting data during the lectures through the students' summaries.
- Collecting data after the lectures through student's interviews.

Therefore, in this section we will first discuss the learning materials and the design of the lectures, i.e. the teaching procedure and then discuss the two research tools involved in this study.

### **2.5.2.1- Teaching Materials:**

#### **(i) The texts:**

In this sub-section, the purpose is to justify first the choice of text-based lectures for the classroom study in this investigation, and then the choice of summaries as a source of data for this study. As previously mentioned, the choice of the whole procedure was inspired the pioneering study by Marton and Saljo (1981), where they provided a model for phenomenographic studies of the students learning experience in higher education. The main premise underlying this choice is that the distinctions between different conceptions of learning cannot be clearly understood only when it comes to looking as specific tasks (Entwistle et al, 1997). Otherwise, the students' accounts will remain broad and general. In addition, reading academic texts is one of the most common study tasks at university. In fact, it has been selected by many researchers as a basis for their phenomenographic studies in higher education. In our case, text-based lectures provided us with the possibility to exploit the texts for both pedagogic and research purposes.

Besides, it is crucial to use the students' responses as evidence of their own interpretation of the texts within the context of the lecture. The way the students make sense of the academic activities inside the classroom is of direct interest in this study. Reporting on a number of qualitative and quantitative studies, Trigwell and Prosser (1999) concluded that the students with a surface approach to learning generally fail to make a distinction

between the information given in a text and the ideas behind the information. This is the reason why the students tend to literally reproduce the author's statements neglecting both the teacher's purpose for selecting that passage, and the author's main focus. However, the students with a deep approach to learning tend to consider the meaning of the text in relation to the previous lectures and also in relation to the context of the lecture. They tend to focus on the ideas behind the presented information or facts.

As for the selection of the texts, it was based on two important criteria: the content and the length of the texts. The content of the selected texts had to fit the programme that the teacher was following during the academic term. This is in order to make it as relevant as possible for the students. The idea of relevance for the students is very important because the students perceive the importance of an academic passage either in relation to the general objectives of the lecture, the teacher, or syllabus. This implies that the texts are necessarily academic and authentic; they typically contained subject-related terminology and deal with linguistic concepts.

In the case of the texts used for this study, they were selected with the purpose of introducing one main idea or concept. Being aware of the difficulties the students have with the linguistic terminology; texts that contain too many new and unfamiliar terms were avoided. Each text contained familiar terms already explained during the term, and two or three terms needed to introduce one main topic of the syllabus. This was expected to be helpful for the students to make connections between the text and the information already taught in the linguistics course.

However, not any text about linguistics could have been selected for this study. Following, Marton (1997: 26) the selected text should present "(...) *arguments, scientific principles, and constructs, and/or is intended to provide a*

*coherent way of explaining or analyzing a phenomenon. (Our brackets).* This kind of materials is intended to encourage deep learning: it encourages seeking meaning, relating ideas to each other, and searching for the message behind the presented arguments. Learning materials based on listing facts for example encourages acquisition of surface information and encourages memorization of facts, and so it is not applicable to the present study. Thus, through the selected texts, the students were expected to make clear distinction between the linguistic information, which includes new terms, and the message that the author wants to convey, that is the significance of the text. The students' ability to perceive this distinction will tell us about the approach they adopt in reading academic texts.

The length of the texts was also taken into consideration. Given that the each of the texts was to serve as a background for a lecture, the passages had to be short. They are not expected to include long paragraphs that involve the students in a long period of silent reading; this would hinder the whole progression of the lecture. This is in order to first to give time for the students to provide some written answers and also listen to the teacher's explanation of the main concepts developed by the author of the passage.

### **(ii) Description of the Texts:**

Two texts were selected as a basis for two lectures in this study. The reason for limiting the number of the lectures was because data were collected during and after every lecture and this made both the data collection and analysis time-consuming. Using more lectures for this study would have implied a longitudinal study which could have been quite illuminating. However, given the qualitative nature of the present research, it was decided to use only two texts as my main interest was in the depth of the information gathered than in the quantity of the sample or information.

### ***a) Description of Text 1:***

This passage was adapted from David Crystal's Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (2010) (See Appendix 4). The purpose of the text is to present two main criticisms of the behaviourist view of language acquisition. Although the term behaviourist theory, is not explicitly mentioned, some terms such as 'stimulus', 'reinforcement', and 'imitation', show the behaviorist view of language acquisition. These terms were familiar to the students, as they had been previously explained in preceding lectures: as part of Bloomfield's contribution to linguistics, his behaviourist views had to be mentioned in the concluding lecture entitled: American Structuralism. This means that the text did not contain complex information and so can be understood by the students. It was meant to bridge between two important theories of language: American structuralism and Generative Grammar. I have chosen the field of language acquisition as it was perceived in the previous lecture as more accessible for the students, as compared to purely linguistic information, which is highly abstract. In addition, language acquisition theories consist of important topics that could provide a good preparation for their 3<sup>rd</sup> and final year.

Therefore, the text was selected to explain one important idea, the limitations of the behaviourist view of language acquisition explained in terms on child's imitation and habit formation. The process of the acquisition of language in general and of grammatical patterns in particular is far more complicated to be simply explained by the process of imitation and habit-formation.

The text contains examples of the kind of grammatical errors typically made by the child in his process of language acquisition. These particular examples have been selected by the author as they represent clear evidence

that imitation and habit-formation is limited when it comes to explaining the acquisition of grammar. This means that the examples are only arguments that support the main idea of the author, and should not be regarded as the main message. In order to perceive the students' ability to make the difference between author's message and examples supporting the main idea, a question is included in which the students were asked about the purpose of the example provided in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last paragraph (See Appendix 5).

In their summaries, the students are expected first to recognize that the text presents limitations of the behaviourist view of language acquisition. This will reflect the students' ability to relate the content of the lectures to each other. If the students fail to explicitly recognize this view and will simply use literally the terms chosen by the author, it reflects their surface way of dealing with the text and failure to go beyond the information and examples presented by the author. Second, the students are expected to focus on the arguments put forward by the author, and not on the examples used to defend the two arguments against behaviourist view of language acquisition. The students' failure to perceive this distinction would indicate a surface way of dealing with text (Marton, 1994, 1997).

***b) Description of text 2:***

Text 2 was taken from Smolinsky's Landmarks of American Language and Linguistics (1993) (See Appendix 6). In this extract from Chomsky's article "*Linguistic Theory*", the author justifies his view of language acquisition as 'creative' and not 'imitative'. He clearly argues that language acquisition can be explained in relation to the human being's 'generative grammar', which is the main idea of the text. Chomsky explains the properties of generative grammar through making associations with the human being's creative abilities. In addition to 'language creativity', the students' are introduced to



'linguistic competence', being an important component of Chomsky's generative grammar.

In their summaries, the students are expected to make clear that the main term is generative grammar. The recognition of other terms like 'creative aspect of human language' and 'linguistic competence' is indicative of the students' deep understanding of the message of the text. However, these two latter terms are considered by the author as properties of generative grammar. This is actually the main message of the text that the students are required to perceive: what generative grammar is and what its components are.

#### **2.5.2.2- Teaching Procedure:**

The teaching procedure during the lectures went through the following steps:

- 1) The students were given a text about a linguistic topic related to the content of the syllabus of 2<sup>nd</sup> year, and then asked to read it carefully in order to be able to answer questions about its content. Commenting on this procedure, Entwistle (1997, 28) claimed that it enables the researcher to investigate 'what is learnt' instead of 'how much is learnt'. In other words, directing the students to the content of the text right from the beginning is likely to encourage qualitative answers instead of quantitative answers. Before they started reading, the students were informed that they were required to provide a written summary of the text immediately after they have finished reading.

Lecture summary sheets were given to the students on which they had to write the lecture summaries (see appendix 3). The reason for using the summary sheets is first to give them clear instructions, and 2<sup>nd</sup> to collect well-structured summaries, on which details such as the lecture date, and names are clearly provided. In addition, the summary sheets were intended to limit the students' written production. The main

reason for limiting the length of the summaries was to implicitly encourage the students to focus on the most important elements of the lecture.

No instructions were given to the students into how summaries should be written; otherwise, this could affect the outcomes and might generate answers with little variety as the students will try to conform their answers to their teacher's instructions. This goes counter our objective which was to obtain summaries that account for their various conceptions of how the activity should be completed.

- 2) The students' written answers were then collected as assignments to be considered by the teacher but are not meant to be part of any evaluation procedure that would have affected their grades. Because the study is not experimental, these summaries were not assessed, but rather analyzed following phenomenographic principles to be able to come out with various categories of description. The students at this stage were not aware that these summaries were to be considered as data in this investigation; this would have affected their motivation and willingness to seriously complete the tasks.
  
- 3) A lecture was given using both teacher-students' interaction and teacher's explanations. The content of the lectures was meant to complement the information of the texts. That is the text-based activities were used as a brainstorming for the lecture. The length of each lecture was 2 hours.

It was important that the students be familiarized with the procedure of a linguistics lecture using reading and summarizing activity. This teaching procedure had already been used in my usual lectures with the groups of students intended to participate in the collection of data. Consequently, as a

teaching method, the lectures planned for the classroom study were not uncommon or totally new for the students.

No pre-reading activities/ exercises were used; such activities/exercises also referred to as 'active reading tasks' direct the students' attention to specific topic or idea before they start reading. This was not going to be useful in the case of our study regarding the objectives of the data collection of this stage; the goal is to give the students an opportunity to extract meaning from the texts; any sort of pre-reading activity was going to affect the participants' study conceptions and approaches. However, the title of each lecture was written on the whiteboard announcing broadly the purpose of the lecture but not that of the text. With regard to the information of the text, the students will only be provided with information about the author and source of the text on their handouts.

The teaching procedure was a crucial, yet only one part of the study. In the next two sections, we shall discuss the data collection tools used in the closing stage of the study; namely, the text summaries and the second semi-structured interview.

### **2.5.2.3- Texts Summaries:**

As previously mentioned, the design of the lectures of the classroom study including the reading activity had to fit the scope of 2<sup>nd</sup> year linguistics syllabus, but at the same time they should be selected in a way that makes them suitable for classroom investigation. Having these objectives in mind, the students' written summaries are assumed to be vital in this study because they can be exploited for both pedagogic and research purposes. In other words, they were used as teaching materials and at the same time as evidence of the students understanding of the text and the objectives of the whole lecture. Given that it was vital for this study to collect data in a natural setting, using the students' summaries, which were spontaneously written in the

classroom, was hoped to bring valuable evidence about their learning experience in the linguistics lectures.

The summaries data was useful to sustain the present research with evidence about the students' study approaches and conceptions while dealing with the learning materials. The students were asked to write a one-page summary that was subsequently used to confirm the students' focus of attention, i.e, the 'what' dimension (See Appendices 2 and 3). In fact, the summaries data were analyzed along with the students' second session of the semi-structured interviews to confirm their adopted approaches as well as their conceptions. The students' freedom to focus on what they believed was relevant in the texts provides very useful evidence of their study orientations. In fact, this was the main reason why utilizing the summaries instead of a set of comprehension questions about the texts. Setting the students to answer a set of questions would have only directed the students' attention to fragmented pieces of information, while the focus of the study was on the ways they made sense of the text as a whole (Marton, 1994, 1997; Marton and Saljo, 1991).

Furthermore, despite the fact that writing summaries is a common academic activity at university, it remains quite demanding. It requires a careful selection of relevant and important ideas instead of unnecessary details. Thus, the summaries were taken as an outcome of what they might have understood from the text, the purpose of the author, and the purpose of the teacher within the context of the linguistics lecture. Successful summaries would have reflected the students' tendency to look for the main idea of the text instead of the peripheral information that is usually used to support the main idea.

This 'qualitative' outcome is believed to have been more useful than responses to short quizzes which could hardly tell us anything significant of the students' approaches to studying an academic subject or their

interpretation of the materials and tasks provided in the classroom. The students' selection of relevant information for their summaries could be identified as instances of lower or/and higher approaches. According to Marton (1994, 1997) a surface approach is reflected in the students' orientation to memorize the facts of the text and their focus on the information instead of the message the text intends to convey. Focusing on the text per se without relating it to the previously learnt ideas reflects a conception of learning as simply memorization of facts and not that of seeking meaning. The students' written answers will provide evidence about the approaches to studying adopted in linguistics classroom and of their conceptions.

These summaries were analyzed along with the stimulated- interviews which took place by the end of the study closed the study. These interviews are addressed in the next section.

#### **2.5.2.4- Stimulated-Recall Interview:**

##### **(i) Rationale:**

As stated earlier in this chapter, interviews become the primary research tool to collect data in any phenomenographic research (Marton and Booth, 1986; 1993). In the present study, it was adopted as the main research tool both in the beginning and closing stages of the present study. The choice of the interviews to generate data about the students' learning conceptions and approaches is crucial in phenomenography. Hence, in this second and final stage of the present research, it was also necessary not to rely on the students' summaries exclusively in drawing conclusions about the participants' learning experience during this study; the construction of a second interview was deemed necessary.

The crucial data in Sge 2 of the study derived from the second session of interviews, which were taking place simultaneously with the classroom study. The latter was designed to encourage the students to focus on the meaning of the texts and to relate ideas from different lectures to generate a personal and meaningful understanding of the classroom tasks designed. However, the students do not necessarily conceive the tasks as expected by the teacher; but rather their conceptions vary from one student to another. In relation to this Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 64) strongly stated:

In a particular class of students, the students' perceptions of their situation in that context vary. This variation results from interaction between the students' prior experiences of similar learning and teaching situations and the particular context within which they are placed. Those perceptions in turn relate to the way the students approach their learning in that context. Thus given the same context, different students from different perceptions of their situations within the context, and approach their learning tasks differently.

Hence, the importance of asking the participants for the way they made sense of the learning tasks designed for them, in addition to their approaches when engaged in the classroom tasks. The objective was to account for the various ways the students approach the same learning situation. Therefore, during these interviews, the students were individually invited to report on the way in which they had understood the lecture in general and of the text in particular. In other words, the participants were asked questions that encouraged them to describe the way they went about reading the text, writing their summaries and making sense of the lecture in general.

Despite being semi-structured, the interviews in this stage differ from the first interview regarding the objectives and the procedure followed in

conducting them. In fact, they could be considered as stimulated-recall interviews (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), during which the students are encouraged to recall and comment on their experiences in tackling the study materials. In these interviews sessions, the participants were asked to comment on some parts of their own summaries that they had produced in the classroom. The interviews were recorded for subsequent analyses and interpretation. The participants' answers were compared in order to account for any variation existing in the way the students interpret a reading material.

**(ii) Construction of the Stimulated-Recall Interview:**

The second interview used in this study was a stimulated-recall interview; a semi-structured interview intended to encourage the participants to reflect on the way they went about reading, making sense of the texts, and writing their summaries (Entwistle, 1997; Trigwell and Prosser, 1999). This kind of interviews was commonly used in phenomenographic research reported in Trigwell and Prosser (1999) Biggs (2003). In this interview, the questions were not meant to constrain the students' expression, but rather to guide the conversation. The objective of this interview was to engage the participants into rethinking the process they went through while dealing with the classroom activity. For this reason, the questions had to be carefully constructed.

The interview was constructed following the What/how model of investigating the students' learning experience by Marton and Booth's (1993, 1997), also referred to as the structural/referential model. The 'what' dimension was meant to target the students' understanding and this would have indicated their learning conception. The 'how' dimension emphasized the students' ways of going about reading and tackling the meaning activities, indicating therefore their learning approaches. Marton and Booth (ibid)

emphasized the fact that this model remained flexible and can be added sub-categories and/or other dimensions depending on the context of the investigation. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) referred to the need for a further dimension which was considered as crucial in explaining both the students' conceptions and approaches. This was the 'why' dimension that helps explaining the students' intentions behind what was understood and the process they went through in achieving their understanding. Therefore, the present interview follows the what/how/why framework for investigating the students' study experience.

Following this framework, the interview questions that centered on three main themes: 'what' the students understood from the texts; and 'how' they have made sense of what they read, in addition to their intentions behind their decisions in approaching the tasks of reading and writing in general and the texts in particular, this would have given us data about the 'why' dimension.

The interview agenda comprised seven main questions; each designed with the objective of collecting data about one of the dimensions mentioned above (Marton and Booth, 1997). Questions 1, 5, and 7 were designed to obtain information about the 'what' dimension, while questions 2 and 4 focused on the process that the students went about in reading the text and writing their summaries. Questions 3 and 6 were meant to collect data about the students' intentions. It is important to mention that throughout the interview, it was quite useful to expose each student to his own summary. This is in order to first help him/her recall what he/she did with more precision, and second for the researcher to be able to extract more concrete information.

These interview questions were designed and asked in this order: The interview opened with this question inviting the students to summarize the text they have just read in the lecture. The student oral summary would have



provided important data about their conception of the text and the process of reading. The students are then asked two questions about the way they approached reading and their intentions while reading. These questions were worded as follows:

**Q1: Can you summarize the text in a few sentences?**

**Q2: Can you describe how you went about reading the passage?**

**Q3: What were you looking for/thinking about while reading?**

Obtaining information about the process that the students followed in producing their summaries was crucial to understand the way they approached the text. The students' intentions are also emphasized at this stage. To this aim the following two questions were asked:

**Q4: Can you describe how you went about writing the summary of the passage?**

**Q5: What did you focus mostly on?**

At this stage it was useful to expose each student with his own summary for two reasons: first to help him/her recall what he/she did with more precision, and second for the researcher to be able to extract more concrete information. The question below was therefore used in the interview:

**Q6: Why did you select this particular information in your summary?**

Besides, Marton and Saljo (1997), among others, have shown in their qualitative study that the students who adopt a deep approach to learning typically tend to find some interest in the materials learnt. The students with surface approach to learning often fail to perceive the usefulness and the objectives behind the selection of specific materials. Therefore, it was

important to ask the students about their personal interest in the reading materials in particular, and the lectures in general. The degree personal interest in lectures can be reflective of the approach adopted by the students. This justifies the choice of the next question, which explicitly asks the students about their feeling about the experience of reading the material formulated as follows:

**Q7: What is your general impression of the text?**

As can be observed from the interview agenda, no question explicitly asked the students about the lecture. This choice is meant to understand the students' ability to relate the texts to the lecture and /or to the whole syllabus. This would have been indicative of the students' ability of perceiving the relevance of the text to the lectures, reflecting a deep approach to learning underlined by the ability to seek meaning beyond the learning materials.

**2.6- Data Collection Procedure:**

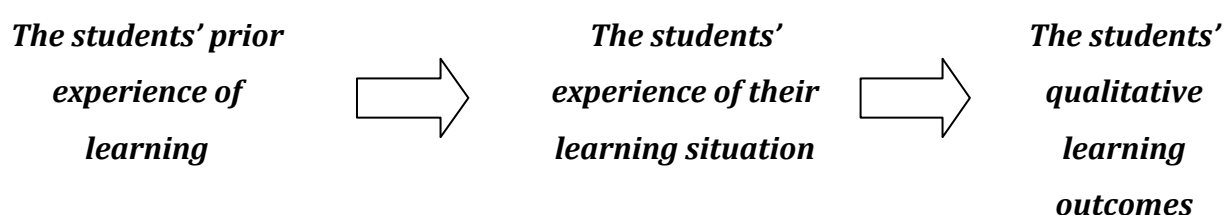
This phenomenographic research took place over 6 months between November 2015 and May 2016. As already stated, it went through two main stages that previously abbreviated as Sge1 and Sge2 of the study. Each stage implied a set of research instruments that were carefully selected to enable the researcher to understand the students' experience of studying Linguistics. The rationale for this procedure was largely based on Prosser and Trigwell's (1999) and models for phenomenographic research on students' learning discussed in Chapter One. This model was adapted for this study as follows:

A fundamental idea in this model is that the students' conceptual understanding of any subject of study is not stable (Entwistle, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2015). This was explicitly expressed by Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 31), using evidence from one of the most widely cited phenomenographic studies carried out by Prosser and Miller (1989:26):

Given a changed learning and teaching situation, those previous understandings may not be evoked. Thus, for example, when Prosser and Miller (1989) found that none of their interview sample of first year university physics students were able to explain successfully the motion of a car travelling at constant speed along a straight road in terms of Neotonian mechanics, this does not mean that given a change of situation or a change of task those same students would not be able to explain such motion successfully.

The study reported in this quotation, which was conducted with physics students, has shown that conceptions of subject-matters have subsequently changes. In other words, the conceptions of learning are a changing process as a result of the interaction with a new learning situation, task, context, or discipline.

**Figure 2.2: Theoretical Framework for the Study Based Prosser and Trigwell Model for the Learning Experience Research (1999)**



### **2.7- Method of Data Analysis:**

This section provides explanations and justifications of the method and process which were undertaken in analyzing the data of the study. Given that the study made use of various instruments in two different stages, more

details about the techniques used to analyze the data collected in each stage is provided in details in Chapter four.

In line with the whole research design and procedure, data analysis for this study derived from the phenomenographic tradition. Thus, phenomenography served as the general principle for the analysis of our data obtained from the various research instruments in both stage 1 and 2. The main purpose of phenomenographic analysis is the identification of various qualitative categories to describe a given phenomenon (Entwistle and Petterson, 2005). Indeed, typical to phenomenography is to acknowledge the diversity in people's experiences of a given phenomenon. Similarly, given the nature of phenomenographic research, it should be acknowledged that there are multiple ways of interpreting the same 'experience'. Thus, the data analysis and interpretation in this research is only one way of dealing with data, as these latter can be interpreted differently with different research objectives in mind and in a different context (Ramsden, 2013).

Before explaining the steps followed in analyzing the data of this study, it should be clarified that while originally phenomenography is used to analyze interviews data, this method is commonly adopted by phenomenographers to analyze written data as well, especially in the educational field. In the present research, phenomenography was adopted to analyze not only interviews data but also the written data collected in both stages of the study. The adaptations made in order to analyze the written data were explained in detailed in Chapter Four where the frameworks for data analyses were fully discussed before the presentation and analyses of the data collected throughout the study.

Concerning the steps followed in analyzing the interviews data, it consisted of the adapted from Marton and Saljo (1997):

- Transcription of the interviews verbatim.
- Sorting out relevant key words and phrases in the transcription
- Selection of relevant extracts illustrating the varieties existing in the data.
- Identifying the various themes for key words.
- Identifying the categories of description.
- Verification of the initial set of categories.
- Constructing the final set of categories of description.
- Identification of the outcome space.

The first step was to transcribe the recorded interviews verbatim to prepare and organize them for initial reading. This step was both time-consuming and challenging due to the fact that the researcher is not a professional transcriber and also to the huge number of the interviews that had been recorded. Once the transcripts were ready, they were first read to indicate the parts relevant to the phenomenon under investigation and eliminate those that were irrelevant. In each transcript, sentences, expressions, and chunks that were thought to be illustrative of the participants' learning conceptions were highlighted and those indicating their study approaches were underlined.

The next step was to focus on the conceptions that could be identified from the first reading of the transcripts in order to form a set of categories. The same was done for the students' learning approaches. A set of themes were identified and given to the initial set of categories that were formed. The transcripts had to be re-read and the categories revised in order to further examine the variation. In the initial stage of categories construction a wide range of categories were identified. After verification, it was becoming evident that not all the categories were worth further exploration.

Finally, the final set of categories was identified for both participants' learning conceptions and approaches. The categories had to be given themes

and clear description insisting on the diversity and the variation that made each category distinct from the others. In addition, each category had to be illustrated with real evidence from the transcripts verbatim. Thus, the chunks of data that were relevant and typically illustrative of every category were selected and discussed for clarity and credibility. The categories had also to be organized from the least to the most complex one.

However, the categories which derived the interviews were not the final results of the study. These categories had to be compared with the categories obtained from the written data in each of the two stages before merging them in order to obtain the final set of categories of description. This implied the analysis of the students' written responses is stage 1 and the students' written summaries in stage 2.

As far as the students' responses are concerned, they were analyzed in the same steps that were followed in analyzing the interviews transcripts. That is to say, the students' written responses were read to identify the themes that were expressing various ways of conceiving linguistics and approaching the study of this subject matter. The identification of these themes was done after several readings in order to highlight and underline any statements that might express the participants' learning conceptions and approaches respectively. In the next step, these themes enabled us to identify the initial set of categories; yet they needed to be checked and refined eliminating all the categories that were too broad.

In the final step, the categories deriving from both interviews and written data had to be checked in order to merge them for the final construction of the categories of description for the students' prior experience of learning. The final set of categories had to be illustrated with typical extracts from both the interviews as well as the written responses. These are the sets of categories that will be discussed in details in Chapter Four.

As for the students' written summaries that constituted an important part of the data in Sge 2 of the study, they were subjected to an initial analysis of the summarizing operations used by the participants in producing their summaries. The objective of this analysis was not to come out with a discourse analysis of the summaries, but rather to find out the various ways that the participants wrote their summaries. That is to say, the main focus was to arrive at the understanding of the different ways that the students produced their summaries. This step enabled us to arrive at the first set of categories which was large. In fact, the identification of the categories after initial analysis of the summaries operations was both challenging and time consuming. The themes given to these categories were quite different from those assigned for the categories identified in first stage of the data analysis. This set of categories was further refined to finally obtain the categories of description for the student's variation in summary writing.

Just like Sge 1 of the study, the categories deriving from the summaries had to be compared to those obtained from the stimulated-recall interviews conducted in the second stage of the study. These interviews were analyzed in the same procedure followed in analyzing the interviews in Sge1 of the study.

Therefore, the findings of this study constituted four sets of categories: the two first sets were constructed for the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to the study of linguistics, while the two other sets were identified for the students' conceptions and the approaches of studying linguistics. It is hoped that these findings would help us to understand the students' experience of learning linguistics in the context of this study.

## **2.8- Pilot Study:**

The research tools used in the present study were designed based on a sound theoretical background; yet, I was aware of the necessity of piloting each

research instrument before its actual implementation. Piloting was a crucial step in this study mainly as this had been my first experience with phenomenographic research design. Given that data for this research was collected in two different stages using various research instruments, a number of steps had to be taken in piloting each instrument to make sure they were appropriate for the context of this study.

All of the research tools used in both Sge 1 and Sge 2 of the study were piloted in May 2015 to make sure they would be ready for implementation by the academic year 2015/2016. Yet, the interviews, the open-ended question, and the classroom study were continuously updated and it was decided that they be piloted again right before their implementation to ascertain their readiness to be deployed. Therefore, the semi-structured and the open-ended question were piloted again on October 2015 while the classroom study was piloted for the second time on March 2016. The results of the pilot study are reported in the following sub-sections.

### **2.8.1- Semi-structured interviews:**

As a new phenomenographer using semi-structured interviews for the first time, the pilot study was also a precious opportunity to improve my interviewing skills. After piloting the interview questions, the following problems had to be improved:

- The pilot experience also helped to learn how and when exactly a follow-up question was necessary.
- In some cases when piloting the interview, I had a tendency to provide examples or choices for the participants when the students block or are unable provide enough data. During the pilot study, it has become evident that the students needed follow up questions instead of choices or directions.



- Some questions were too open that they resulted in long conversations for more than one hour. It was decided to remain focused on the why and how dimensions.
- Some questions were observed to be ambiguous and had to be refined in a way that enables the students to answer more easily without resorting to the help of the interviewer. In some cases, the question had to be divided into two main questions to eliminate ambiguity.
- Some questions had to be added to the interview agenda.

Details about the improvements made in each of the two interviews used in this study are provided in what follows:

#### **2.8.1.1- Changes made to the semi-structured interview used in Sge 1:**

Initially only 4 questions were asked, these were: *Q1: According to you what is linguistics?Q2: What did your teacher do in the lectures?Q3: What did you do during the lectures?Q4: How did you prepare for the end term tests and exams?*

The students had difficulties answering questions 1 and 3 as they seemed to be ambiguous. Concerning question 1, the students thought they were supposed to define linguistics as defined in the linguistics course instead of expressing their own understanding of the subject of study. In other cases, the students simply described the 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics course; which was not the purpose of the question. As for question 3, the students tended to describe the course instead, while this was not the aim of the question. The pronoun ‘you’ in the question was a bit confusing and it had to be made clearer.

Based on the pilot study, the following changes were made:

Q1 “According to you what is linguistics” turned out to be: Q1- “Based on your previous experience of studying linguistics, what do you understand by linguistics?”, and Q2- “Can you describe your 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics lecture?”.

As for Q3: What did you do during the lectures?" It had to be refined and divided to become: Q5: what did you typically do in the lectures as a student? And Q6: what did you mostly focus on during these lectures?

It was decided to add 2 questions to the interview: the first one in relation to the students' difficulties and the second in relation to assessment. A question on the students' difficulties was added to the interview agenda; it was worded as follows: Q3 "Did you have any difficulties in understanding your 1<sup>st</sup> year linguistics lectures?" was added to the interview agenda. Initially, it was asked as a follow-up question, if needed; however, it was observed that all the students were keen to elaborate on this issue. Another question in relation to the students' preparation for the text and exams was needed to obtain in-depth data. This was Q8 in the final version of this interview: "What did you mostly concentrate on when you prepared for the texts and exams? This decision was taken based on many studies on the students' experience of learning in higher education, to mention some, Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 2013. These studies, among many others, emphasized the importance of the experience of preparing for and taking exams in shaping the students' study conceptions and approaches.

### **2.8.1.2- Changes made to the semi-structured interview used in Sge 2:**

Initially the interview contained these questions: *Q1: Can you summarize the text in a few sentences?Q2: How did you find the text?Q3: Can you describe how you did the task?Q4: Can you describe how you wrote the summary?Q5: Did you find any difficulties while doing the task?Q6: did you find the activity of reading in linguistics any different from reading in other modules such as literature, civilization, and reading comprehension?*

The following improvements were made to this interview:

Questions 2 and 6 were omitted from the interview agenda. The question "How did you find the text? was omitted as it was found to be redundant; it

could have been asked as a follow-up question to Question 1; while Question 6 was found not to as useful as expected .

Questions 3 and 4 were replaced by other more precise questions: question 3 “Can you describe how you did the task” was found to be broad and ambiguous; the task involved reading and writing; and the students were not sure which part of the task they were supposed to focus, they tended to neglect one part of the task and focus on another. So it was decided to ask more precise questions related to each part of the task. These were:

“Can you describe how you go about reading the passage?”

“What were you looking for /thinking about while reading?”

“Can you describe how you sent about writing the summary of the passage?”

“What did you mostly focused on?”

Two other questions were judged to be important to obtain more comprehensive data (see section 2.5.2.4), these were:

“Why did you select this particular information in you summary?”

‘What is your general impression of the text?’

### **2.8.2- Open-Ended Question:**

Just like the interviews, this research tool was piloted in two different periods; it was challenging to design one question that would generate data needed for this investigation. The initial question was worded as follows: ***“According to you, what is linguistics?”***

This question was found to be ambiguous and too broad for the students. They were not sure what to write about. Refining the question was needed to make the question clearer. Thus, two important details were added

to the question, the first was to ask the students to reflect on their previous experience of studying linguistics, and the second was to emphasize their own personal understanding linguistics rather than what they expect the teacher them to understand. The open-ended question was improved as follows:

***Reflecting over your previous experience of studying linguistics, describe what you understand by linguistics.***

After the second pilot of this question, I could see the difference in the students' ability to proceed into writing their ideas without being urged to ask me for clarifications.

### **2.8.3- Questionnaire:**

Given that the questionnaire used was adapted from a version that was implemented for participants in quite different contexts. It was important to pilot this research instrument. After piloting the questionnaire, no difficulties were observed on the part of the participants to understand the items. A few improvements were made to the original version to make it fit more the university studies, and direct the students' attention to thinking of their studies at university. The changes were the following:

- In section 1, 'what is the aim of learning?', it was thought that the expression 'learning at university' would be more specific than 'learning' in general, which was observed misleading for the students.
- In section two 'Approaches to studying': only two improvements were made in relation to items 4 and 10.

### **2.8.4- The Classroom Study:**

The classroom study comprised of two texts , each followed by a set of questions and a summary task. After the pilot study, it was decided to omit the questions and rely on the summary exclusively. This is because it was found

out that the questions would have affected the students' summary, while the purpose was to help the students generate their own personal summaries based on their own understanding without being affected by the teacher's/ researcher's intentions.

### **2.9-Validity and Reliability Issues:**

The present research follows the phenomenographic approach in collecting and analyzing the data. Phenomenography draws on the qualitative interpretive anti-positivist type of research. This latter is often criticised for the lack of validity and reliability of the findings in addition to the subjectivity of the researchers' interpretations due to the research instruments commonly used in this type of research, such as interviews.

However, the qualitative interpretive researchers maintain that the principles of validity and reliability are used to evaluate the quality of the quantitative research and are claimed not to be directly applicable to qualitative research (Murphy and Gingwall, 2005). For example, Lecompte and Goetz (1982) and Patton (1990) suggested that evaluating rigour in interpretive research should be done using different methods; yet they proposed maintaining the same terminology, ie., validity, reliability, and objectivity. Other researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2005) proposed not only different methods but also different terminology. They suggested the terms credibility (validity) and dependability (reliability). In the present study, the traditional terms validity, reliability, and objectivity are maintained; however, we hold the view that the methods for ensuring high quality in this study, which draws on phenomenography, should not be compared to that used to evaluate rigor in a quantitative study. In this section, we discuss how issues of validity, reliability were considered in the present research.

### **2.9.1- Validity:**

To start with validity, it refers to the whether the results reflect what is actually studied. In other words, ensuring the validity of the study can be done by showing the extent to which the findings can be trusted. In phenomenography derives from interviews and so the validity of the data becomes an issue. This is because the validity of the findings in the positivist tradition can be assessed by the the degree to which the participants' accounts of their experiences have been honest and 'true'. Thus, how can validity be ensured in phenomenography?

In relation to this issue, phenomenographers acknowledge the fact that the participants' accounts of their experiences may not be 'true' descriptions of the 'real' way they actually experienced reality or the phenomenon under investigation. However, the main concern of a phenomenographic study is not investigating the 'true' way of experiencing reality; but rather, the individuals' conceptions of that experience. In this case, validity as it is suggested by the positivists cannot be directly applicable in phenomenography (Lincoln and Guba, 2005).

In the present study, the validity of the findings was enhanced following these steps:

- Six months of engagement with the same participants and systematic data collection during all this period must have been quite a positive aspect in the study to the credibility of the study.
- Data triangulation using multiple data collection instruments to obtain the same type of information from the participants. This is in order to ensure the consistency of the data. In addition, the participants were interviewed twice in two different periods of the study. This enhances the validity of the final results as it helps checking how systematic the students were in their responses.

- Recruiting relatively large number of students enrolled in three different 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate groups to participate in this study.

As for the validity issues in relation to the interviews, they were minimized by:

- Preparing semi-structured interviews with flexible interview agendas which allowed the students to be more expressive and less limited in reporting their experiences.
- Eliminating the use of technical and difficult terminology which could be misleading for the students during the interviews.
- Asking the same questions in another way during the interviews to check the student's responses.
- Probing the students to encourage more clarifications and explanations of what they might mean.

### **2.9.2- Reliability:**

As for Reliability, it is assessed in terms of the consistency and replicability of the findings with another researcher. This is an issue in phenomenography due to the nature of the findings. Marton (1986) maintained that it could be possible for two researchers not to come out necessarily with the same set of categories of description, even when working with the same subjects in the same context. However, he (ibid) argued that the categories, once formed, should be clearly and explicitly described and illustrated to the reader, so that when other researchers should focus on the description rather than the explanation and interpretation of the categories. In this case, even if two different researchers might not come out with exactly the same categories, they could nevertheless find the descriptions quite similar in case of replicability.

Applying this phenomenographic principle to the present study, the steps below were followed to ensure the reliability of the findings:

- Explaining clearly and in details the process of data collection, justifying all the research decisions.
- Explaining the process of data analysis globally in this chapter and in details in Chapter four, where the frameworks that were adapted for the analysis of the different types of data in this study are explained. In this case all the steps that led us to the construction of the final sets of the categories were clarified.
- Describing all the categories from the least to the most complex with illustrations from the data verbatim.
- Summarizing all the categories of description on the outcome space, which provides the final descriptions of the categories in more global way.

### **Conclusion:**

The purpose of this chapter was to clarify the processes, strategies of inquiry, the research design, and methods for data collection and analysis. A justification was established for the taking up of phenomenography as the research approach for this study, and its implications on the research design and analysis of data. These latter are going to be presented in the next chapter.



**Chapter Three:**  
**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Presentation and Analysis of Stage One Findings**

#### **Introduction:**

Throughout the previous chapters we have argued that in order to understand the students' experience of learning in any context, there is a need to consider the conceptions and approaches held by the students at the beginning of a new learning experience (Entwistle, 1997). This is referred to in educational research as the prior-experience of learning, which was addressed in the Sge1 of our study. The data that was collected in this stage is analyzed in this chapter. Sge1 employed a triangulation of qualitative tools and a questionnaire, each contributing to obtain a comprehensive view about the diverse ways in which the students had interpreted and approached in their prior-experience of studying Linguistics.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section examines the process in which the data were analyzed highlighting how the various categories of description derived from the data. Following this, a detailed analysis of the collected data is presented, focusing on the categories of description along with the key features for each category. This chapter concludes with the outcome spaces for the prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics respectively. These findings will form the foundation against which a deeper understanding of the students' learning conceptions of and approaches to studying Linguistics will be explored in next chapter of this dissertation.

#### **3.1- Method of Data Analysis:**

Within the phenomenographic research paradigm, the process of data analysis is considered as important as the categories themselves and their

interpretation. Therefore, this chapter begins with a detailed description of the process of data analysis followed by a presentation of the categories of description obtained in each stage. While the general principles of the data analysis method were taken from the phenomenographic paradigm, already discussed and justified in Chapter Two, this chapter is going to provide more details about the process and conduct of data analysis so as make the findings clearly presented for the reader in this chapter. In addition, following phenomenographic analysis, forming the outcome space is a necessary step in presenting the data. Hence, our analysis will culminate with a presentation of the outcome space for Stge1 of the study in which the key findings obtained from all the research instruments will be brought together to provide a holistic idea about the outcome space for the students' prior-experience of studying Linguistics.

### **3.1.1- Data Analysis Procedure:**

The analysis of the students' written responses to the open-ended question and semi-structured interviews was based on their own statements. The approach at this stage focused on the transcripts and the written response as a whole instead of separate statements. After several readings, a number of themes started to emerge. Initially, several themes came up, but when analyzing the data deeper trying to sort out the differences rather than the similarities, the initially identified themes were becoming more and more limited in number. The few themes identified in our second stage of data analysis were used to form several groups in preparation for the next crucial stage, which is the identification of the categories of description for the students' conceptions and then approaches, which then were used to form two types of meaningful categories of description: categories of description for prior-conceptions of Linguistics, and another set for prior-approaches to the study of Linguistics.

As already stated, the categories of description in this stage were drawn from both the students' written responses and interviews. The written responses accounted for the students' conceptions of Linguistics study. These latter were highlighted and considered carefully when analyzing the interviews data, which contained data about the students' approaches to the study of linguistics. Four categories were formed, each describing the students' prior-conceptions of learning, and three categories describing their prior approaches. Pertinent statements were reported and commented on; however, only prototypical responses are provided here as illustrations. Typical and well-selected illustrations from the participants' written responses and answers during the interviews are provided for clarity. When reporting the students' written and verbal statements the subjects' codes from S1 to S40 will be used.

Following the phenomenographic tradition in data analysis, (See Chapter One) the categories were gradually organized from the least to the most complex one, starting from Category A onwards. In other words, Category A is considered as expressing the students' least sophisticated conception of and approach to studying Linguistics, while category D is the most sophisticated one (Marton and Booth 1992). In addition, as in all phenomenographic studies, the categories are interrelated; yet, the boundaries between one category and another are set as follows: category D includes elements of category C, which in turn includes elements of category B, and so on. However, the opposite is not true, that is, category A is missing elements from category B and so forth. In addition, given the inductive nature of the inquiry, it was essential to remain open to any findings other than those reported in the literature during the whole process of the analysis.

Our phenomenographic analysis went through various steps from sorting out relevant data, selection of relevant extracts illustrating the varieties existing in the data, identifying the various themes for the categories,

identifying the categories of description, verification of the initial set of categories, constructing the final set of categories of description, and finally identification of the outcome space. Given this long process and the many research instruments that were analyzed in the phenomenographic way, it would have been unfeasible to report in details the whole process of the data analysis. However, concrete examples of the codification of the students' written responses and interviews responses are provided in this chapter or clarity.

In concrete terms, here are the steps we went about in identifying the categories of description:

- Preparing tables to analyze the data.
- Using the written or verbal data verbatim.
- Highlighting the key words in the data.
- Identifying initial recurrent themes for the highlighted key words
- Highlighting any differences in the identified themes.
- Developing the themes into initial categories
- Examine how the identified categories might be related to each other taking into consideration the context of the study.
- Forming categories in a hierarchical way.
- Identifying the outcome space.

In the table below, we provide an example of this data analysis process in concrete terms

**Table 3.1: Analyzing the Participants’ Verbal and Written Data into Themes and Categories**

Participants’ words	Key words	Themes	Categories
It was not difficult, but I don’t how to say it (...) it was too much, we had to memorize many new terms and definitions, and sometimes I get lost.	Too much	Heavy workload	Less advanced
	Memorize	Memorizing	Surface
	I get lost	Confusion	Surface

In what follows is the analysis of the responses to the open-question with the aim of depicting the students’ prior-conceptions of studying Linguistics. This will be followed by the analysis of the interviews emphasizing the students’ study approaches. The student’s prior-conceptions and prior-approaches are further depicted in analyzing the questionnaire. It should be reminded that the final aim of the phenenomenographic analysis of the students’ written and verbal data is to have an outcome space summarizing all the variation in both conceiving and approaching Linguistics.

In addition, in presenting the verbal and written data in this study, we added transcription protocol to guide the reader in understanding the selected extracts. The transcription protocol used is as follows:

**Table 3.2: Transcription Protocol**

Transcription symbol	Meaning
<u>Participant’s word(s)</u>	Key words supporting the interpretation.
Numbers (1), (2), (3)	Themes emerging from the analysis of in each category.
[.....]	Content omitted from the original transcript
(.....)	Unfinished sentences or long pauses

Because the extracts selected for illustration are verbatim, they may contain language mistakes, which were not corrected or omitted for the sake of reporting their true words as faithfully as possible.

### **3.1.2- Forming the Categories of Description:**

This section discusses the way the categories of description were formed in the present phenomenographic inquiry. The categories of description obtained in Sge1 of the study derived from two instruments: an open-ended question and a semi-structured interview. However, the results obtained from the open-ended question and the interviews will contribute to the construction of the categories of description of the students' prior learning conceptions and approaches.

It should be noted that while the students' written responses targeted mainly their prior-conceptions of Linguistics, the interviews addressed both the prior-conceptions of and prior-approaches to studying Linguistics. However, as will be seen in the analysis, the results stemming from both the students' written responses and the interviews were complementary and provided useful data about the subjects' prior-experience of Linguistics study. In fact, this was the main reason why the results deriving from both instruments together were used to form the final sets categories of the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to linguistics study.

To establish an initial set of categories, each instrument was analyzed separately. However, combining the data from both instruments proved more insightful for developing the final set of the categories and enhancing the reliability of the findings. As a result, it was decided to report the results of both instruments within the same categories for cross-checking purposes, as will be detailed in the upcoming sections.

### **3.2- Analysis of the Open-Ended Question: Categories of Description of the Students' Prior-Conceptions**

Collecting data about the students' prior-conceptions of studying Linguistics required asking them to express their 'understanding' of Linguistics as a subject of study as well as the content of this course. The open-ended question, administered in the beginning of Sge 1, asked the participants to freely write about what they understand Linguistics to be, based on their previous experience. The same question was asked in the interviews to check and both confirm their responses to the open-ended question and to seek more clarifications and details for the reasons behind their prior-conceptions. The categories of description identified reflected the variation among the students' conceptions of Linguistics according to their prior-experience of studying Linguistics.

Because the phenomenographic analysis accounts for the differences and variation in the students' written accounts, looking at the common aspects does not apply in the process of forming the categories of description. However, it is noteworthy to highlight a prominent finding shared by all students. A recurrent finding in the majority of the written responses was the idea that Linguistics is the scientific study of language. While this suggests uniformity at first glance, a deeper analysis revealed significant variation in their interpretations and perspectives. In fact, the majority of the students quoted this definition of Linguistics in their written responses from their first year course of Linguistics. In the introductory part of the course, Linguistics is defined as of linguistics as "the scientific study of language" (see appendix 1).

While reporting this definition by the students cannot be said to be wrong, it might suggest the students' tendency to resort to what has been previously rehearsed in Linguistics to talk about this course since it was a definition often taught in the first year Linguistics course. This definition was reported in almost all the participants' written responses and interviews.



However, the phenomenographic analysis of their written responses and interviews transcripts suggested that they seemed to have had different understanding of what '*the scientific study of language*' might mean, suggesting therefore a variation in the students' prior-conceptions of linguistics. This variation is reported in the following categories of description which will be discussed and illustrated in what follows.

### **3.2.1- Category A: Linguistics is the Historical and Philosophical Study of Language**

#### **i) Description of the Category:**

When the students were asked to write about their understanding of Linguistics as a subject of study, a significant number of students (23 students), directly associated it with the historical development of language(s) (1), and philosophical debates about the origins of language (2). This way of conceiving Linguistics was typically expressed by S25 and S20 respectively in their written responses:

In my opinion, linguistics is defined as science of language. The common synonym is philology (1). Its objective is to show how the language began and started to be used, and where it came from (2). Well, the most well-known philosophers are Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. **(S25)**

Linguistics studies language scientifically and its details. The main point in linguistics is the debates (2) about the origin of language (1). There are different theories about language from various philosophers (2). **(S20)**

These two themes were part of their first year syllabus taught in the beginning of the first term only (see appendix 2); yet, the students in this category limited their understanding of Linguistics to these topics exclusively. They see the aim of this course as limited to an increase in knowledge about the history of language and philosophical debates about the origins of language.

The same conception was typically depicted in the responses of S4, S5, S8, S9, S13, S18, S20 S21, S22, S25, S26, S27, S29, S30, S31, S32, S33, S35, S38 and S39.

**ii) Key features:**

In this category, the prior-experience of studying Linguistics narrowly shaped by the few lectures where the focus was essentially on the historical development (1) of the study of language including the philosophical debates on the origins of language (2). As can be illustrated in this extract from a written response of **(S8)**:

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It showed us the history of linguistics (1), how people developed language and linguistics (1), such as the philosophers who did debates about language (2), where it came from etc (2).

In terms of meaning given to Linguistics, the students' understanding of the content of Linguistics in this category can be said to have been limited since their understanding was confined to the content covered in a few lectures. The students completely overlooked topics other than the history of language development and philosophical debates in the syllabus. Consequently, topics related to linguistic analysis such as syntactic, semantic, or morphological analysis, which constituted an important part of the first year course of Linguistics, were either neglected or treated as peripheral.

Key topics in the first year Linguistics course, such as ‘what Linguistics is’ and ‘what Linguistics is not’, were not addressed by the students in this category. While they admitted having studied them, they seem not to have grasped their importance. This was reflected in the total disregard for whole sections of the first year course content in their written account of what they understood.

The students depicted in this category found it more accessible and/ or more engaging to understand the history of language than Linguistic matters *per se* (3). Indeed, they reported having found difficulties understanding the link between the various lectures or the purpose of historical and philosophical information within the whole course of linguistics in general. For example, the students in both their written accounts and interviews mentioned a number of other linguistic topics tackled in their first year experience related to language analysis such as syntax, morphology, phonetics, etc.; yet, they seemed not to have given them importance, although these topics were taught during a whole semester (3). This extract from the interview with S13 illustrates this limited understanding of the content of the first year Linguistics course:

Linguistics is a science that studies language and last year we talked about the history of language that it's started in Greek (1) and at that time there were a lot of debates between philosophers (2) because of language. Also, linguistics has many branches (sic) [.....] there's Etymology, we studied this that it is about the history of language, also there's phonetics, it studies the sounds, morphology, it's about the words, and there are others.

Then, she concluded:

I think that linguistics is really important because it helps us to know its origins, when and where it originated, and how this field appeared and become the interest of a lot of philosophers".

This example illustrates the tendency of the student to merely reproduce a widely cited definition memorized during their first year, without

questioning or making sense of it. While she acknowledged that Linguistics is a science, she was unable to explain what made it scientific, and confused it with other disciplines like history and philosophy. This indicates that these students were unable to question the purpose of learning about the history of language and Linguistics. Linguistic knowledge is seen not to be questioned; it is simply retained and reproduced whenever needed.

As far as the content of the course is concerned, it was referred to as being 'complex', 'difficult', or 'hard'. These adjectives were depicted from the student's own responses. These extracts illustrate this point:

"[.....] it contains many difficult terminology that are hard to understand."  
(S18)

"[...] it is an important module, and it is one of the most difficult for me"  
(S27)

"In Linguistics, we find many complex words that we don't understand easily" (S23)

These extracts indicate that the students in this conception tended to associate the subject with negative experience precisely because of the linguistic terminology. The students seem to avoid questioning the utility of the module due to the perceived complexity of the terms used in language analysis.

Seeking more evidence from the interviews, we could observe the students expressed not only the same negative experience of studying Linguistics, but also they could see no motive for studying Linguistics except to obtain the pass grade, as shown in this interview extract:

**S23:** The first term was very simple, and then it got into details, so it sort of getting complicated. It was hard last year [...] it was complicated.

**Inter:** Did you try to do anything in relation to the study difficulties in Linguistics?

**S23:** Actually, I just wanted to have good grades.

In this interview extract we can see how the student avoided questioning the course content when it was getting more challenging for her. Interestingly, the lectures related to the origins of language and philosophical debates were part of the first term course content, which was described by this student as “*very simple*”.

Thus, these extracts provide us with evidence that Linguistics is not viewed as a subject that needs reflection and understanding, it is regarded as a complex subject which has very little relevance to their studies or real life. The Linguistic knowledge acquired in the Linguistic lectures can be useful only for assessment purposes.

In addition, the students holding this conception seemed to have focused on unrelated bits of information and appeared unable to understand neither the relationship between them nor the objectives of that information. As a result, the students tended to confuse linguistics with history and philosophy, and appeared unable to recognize linguistics as a distinct discipline. They also seemed unable to understand linguistics beyond historical development of language and philosophical debates as shown in the following account written by S33:

I don't know what point of view I should have towards linguistics, but I think it's interesting to have the knowledge about origins of words that we use, and have a background about language in general and the language use as an individual. These topics of last year were interesting. In linguistics, there is also topics of syntax and morphology, and phonetics but these topics had a lot of technical words which I don't get, so I think linguistics is more philosophical. I think linguistics is more interesting when we learn about the origins of words..

This extract illustrates a tendency to avoid understanding the purpose of the lectures and apprehend the utility of topics related to linguistic analysis

mainly because she found the terminology challenging. For this student, the study of linguistics could be interesting only for increasing knowledge about the origins of language, a topic she was intrinsically interested in. Thus, this conception of linguistics was also limited to history and philosophy in the students who either seemed have an intrinsic interest in history and philosophy (1) or have found difficulties understanding topics related to language analysis (2), or as can be seen in this extract taken from the interview with S9:

**Inter:** Can you describe what you understand linguistics to be?

**S9:** For me linguistics is mostly the history of language (1) and slowly they made it scientific. At first it was about the history of language(1), they wanted to understand the origin of language (1) because it was important to understand. After, they made it scientific, they started talking about details, grammatical details like semantics, syntax[...]. So when they started digging into details, it started to be more scientific, yes it started to get complicated(2) But I'm more interested in historical background (1). I didn't like that [...] I didn't struggle with syntax and morphemes but I didn't like that (1)".

*The same observations can be also made in this interview extract with S23:*

**S23:** We study linguistics to understand the history of people and the language we use (1), all languages.

**inter:** Is this what you understood from the linguistics lectures last year?

**S23:** No, we also studied in the second semester the sentences, phonetics and phonology and so on.

**Inter:** Okay.

**S23:** The second term was about topics like phonology and I don't like that. I hate phonology, it was really complicated (2).

**Inter:** Can you explain why?

**S23:** Yeah, I don't like that at all. I prefer topics of history and development of language (1). It's interesting (1).

As a consequence, the students holding this conception adopt what Entwistle (1997) termed "the avoidance strategy", which manifests in the students' focus on the parts of the syllabus that are the least challenging for

them. The “avoidance strategy” appeared to be dominating in the accounts of the students holding the conception of Linguistics reflecting their perception of their roles in the studying Linguistics as limited simply to receiving information without necessarily questioning its importance. Whenever the information is slightly challenging, the students tend to resort to the avoidance strategy.

What can also be observed from the above extracts is that students in this category did not feel challenged by linguistic information taught in the course of linguistics, except that related to the development of writing and philosophical debates; they found linguistic analysis rather overwhelming. The students consequently qualified these lectures as ‘complicated’, ‘too hard’, ‘difficult’, ‘boring’ (3). As a consequence, their concentration goes to what they might find easy or interesting. The students in this category did not manage to grasp the aim of the teacher when introducing the part of the course where linguistic analysis was the main topic (4), as expressed by S32 in her written account:

We studied phonetics, syntax, and all that, phonology, and the teacher was always saying to us it is important to concentrate because they are important lessons, but I don't really see why they are important (4),it was complicated and boring(3).

In terms of use of content, the students in this category did not see the study of language analysis and description as an opportunity to develop their critical thinking but rather as imposed lectures that had to be studied only to obtain the pass mark. Said differently, the lectures related to language analysis were useful only to take the exam and obtain the pass mark. As an example, S27 voiced her struggle with syntactic descriptions and emphasized her main intention to study these themes was to pass the exam of linguistics.

**Inter:** What does studying linguistics mean to you?

**S27:** Linguistics is a module(...)

Inter: Yes, what do you understand by Linguistics based on your first year course of linguistics ?

**S27:** Yes, Linguistics is a mixture of science, history and philosophy. We studied the ancient grammarians. In the 1<sup>st</sup> semester we studied everything about history and philosophy, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester we studied the diagrams, the sentences.

**Inter:** Do you mean syntactic analysis?

**S27:** Yeah, syntax and morphology (...), grammar, diagrams. It was a bit complicated (3). [...] so, if you tell me what you think of linguistics in last year, I will tell you the history of linguistics. It was more interesting (4), but those complicated lessons I didn't get it (2). I just studied that just to get good grades actually.

In sum, the students depicted in this category of description appeared to be passive receivers of pieces of information, which were mostly perceived as unrelated to each other. The purpose behind what was learned was vaguely understood. This conception of Linguistics is clearly reflecting what Marton (1993) refers to as 'surface learning', which is far from being encouraged in higher education.

### **3.2.2- Category B: Linguistics as the Acquisition and Accumulation of Knowledge about the English Language**

#### **i) Description of the Category:**

Despite the small number of students holding this conception (S1, S3, S6, S7, S10, S11, S14, S17, S22, and S40), their statements were significantly and unexpectedly distinct. In this category, Linguistics is understood as primarily related to history and philosophy; however it is understood as being essentially concerned with **improving the English language skills** such as grammar, writing and speaking. Linguistics in the students' written accounts



explicitly is related the study of Linguistics with the study of the English language. It therefore, signifies learning about pronunciation, grammar, syntax and morphology, all of which are believed by these students to be primary in understanding Linguistics. According to the students expressing this conception, the aim of Linguistics is to show them how English best works and the content of Linguistics could be useful only because it enables them **to improve their English proficiency**. This was typically expressed in the response of S11 who wrote:

It (Linguistics) tells us about pronunciation and words construction, it tells us about the good pronunciation and the correct forms of words and it helped me ameliorate my English. It's about grammar.

#### **ii) Key Features:**

In expressing their understating of Linguistics as a subject of study, the ten students mentioned above referred directly to topics related to levels of linguistic analysis (1) such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax, which were the most reported by these students. They explicitly related studying Linguistics with studying the English language skills (2), which reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of both the course and the discipline in general. The following extract from the written response of S11 is typically illustrating this confusion:

Linguistics is a complex study of language, for example phonetics, phonology, syntax, and morphology (1). Language is meant to help us communicate and so studying language is important to learn how to communicate correctly (2).

A similar view can be observed in this extract taken from the interview with S7:

For example, phonetics (1) is the study of sounds. It is important because when learning a language, we need to learn how to communicate correctly at first (2).

It was meant to be useful to show these students the correct usage of the English language (3) and the objective of the teacher for them was to teach them how to improve their language use (4) as shown in the conclusion made by S40:

So, our teacher was trying to teach us this science to help us to improve our language and understand it with each detail (4), this science is the best way to know the language with its different sides (3). It is the best way to be good in writing (3).

This conception includes themes of expanding awareness similar to the previous category of description. However, we found evidence that the understanding of Linguistics in this category extends that of conception A: it is not just about philosophical debates and history of languages (5) but also about levels of linguistics (6). The students seemed to have had difficulties understanding the purpose of linguistic teaching and tended to simplify it to a mere teaching of technicalities of English (7). The students did not question the linguistic information they were receiving or raised questions about the purpose of the linguistic information. When interviewed, S11 mentioned the historical study of language as paramount in Linguistics. However, he linked it mainly to the study of levels of linguistics, such as syntax, phonetics, and morphology, emphasizing the way these lectures could improve the students' language grammar and pronunciation of English. This can be observed in this extract from the interview with this participant:

**S11:** Linguistics for me is a mixture of philosophy and science.

Inter: Okay, can you explain more?

**S11:** Science, because there are rules of syntax (7) and there is a part, a philosophical part (5), they deal with history of language (5). So Linguistics in a part is the philosophical study of language (5) and in a part is the scientific study of language.

**Inter:** You said you learnt things in the second term that were not philosophical.

**S11:** Yeah, Each branch (of linguistics) helps us understand a part of the language, and when we understand like the parts of the language, a sentence, the word itself, we can understand English better.

The same tendency to relate the content of the linguistics course to develop knowledge about the English language was found all the interviews with the students depicted in this category. The linguistic knowledge was found to be significant because it was helpful in improving their English language skills in particular, the English grammar and the writing skill (8). According to the students holding this conception of Linguistics, this may increase their chances to obtain better marks in the exams given that the students' language accuracy affects their marks, as expressed by the S10 and S40 (9).

[...] Linguistics is important in our studies, just like grammar and writing (8). We learn a lot of things about English and how to use it correctly in writing, in the exams, etc (9). **(S10)**

I learned a lot of things from Linguistics that helped me ameliorate my English (8). We always want to ameliorate English writing and grammar because if our writing is incorrect we cannot have good marks (9). **(S40)**

This was confirmed when analyzing the interviews data, where the same participants tended to express the same understanding of the purpose of the Linguistics course content, as illustrated in this interview extracts of S10:

**Inter:** You said the second part of the programme was more interesting.

**S10:** Yes, of course [...]

**Inter:** Can you say more about this?

**S10:** Because it was not just about history, I mean, I could learn many interesting things about English, how it works, how we make words in English (8).

**Inter:** Why was this more interesting?

**S10:** It helps me to understand English more(7), that's why I'm here [...] and when we improve our English we can succeed in all the modules (9). Our teachers want us to have good English and good style especially in tests and exams (9)

Similarly, **S40** expressed the same understanding:

**S40:** [...] we improve our language (7), that's it. I don't know how to say it, it helps us in a way (8).

**Inter:** How?

**S40:** I don't know, in the exams (9) for instance, if you don't write well you cannot get good marks (9).

The students' themes emerging from the analysis of the students' written accounts can be summarized as follows:

- Linguistic analysis is understood as study of the English language skills.
- Linguistic knowledge is useful only because it shows the students the accurate usage of the English language.
- Course content objectives are Fragmented and limited understanding of Linguistics reflected in the students' difficulties to see the global objectives of the course in general.
- Their role is to accumulate knowledge about the English language to be used in their English studies.

In sum, can say that there is a shift from over-emphasizing historical and philosophical information to a focus on language usage. In other words, Linguistics according to this conception deals with the origins of language but

more importantly it signifies learning about how to improve one's language proficiency. While this shift is clear in the students' statements, this conception remains too limited and expresses a simplistic conception of Linguistics. In addition, we could notice the students concern about obtaining of good grades was prominent in this conception. The students appeared to have been interested in a few linguistic lectures thinking that it would be helpful to increase their chances to pass the end of the term exams.

In the next category, we present a few students reporting a more developed conception of Linguistics.

### **3.2.3- Category C: Linguistics as Understanding Practical Knowledge and Analyzing Languages**

#### **i) Description of the Category:**

This conception, which was expressed by only three students (S12, S15, and S28), represents a shift in the understanding of Linguistics as a module limited to a few lectures and aspects of language to a broaden understanding of Linguistics as a discipline related to language analysis. Said differently, Linguistics is conceived as the study of the analysis of different languages. Interestingly, linguistic knowledge is understood more globally trying achieve an understanding of the course content beyond the lectures presenting philosophical debates about language development and the analysis, and beyond of the English language (1)as was the case with the previously presented conceptions. The students holding this conception explicitly related the study of Linguistics to the analysis of language in terms of form, meaning, pronunciation and context (2). This conception can be illustrated by in this example taken from the written accounts of **S12,S15, and S28**:

Linguistics is known as the study of language based on many theories (1). The linguists try to analyze language in general (1).They analyze grammar, phonetics and meaning (2). (S28)

It is the scientific study of language specifically language form, language meaning, and language context (2). It's also the analysis of human language (1) as a system for relating sounds in languages (2). **(S12)**

Linguistics is the scientific study of languages. The scientists are interested in characteristics of any language (1). For example, its syntax, phonology, and morphology (2). **(S15)**

## ii) Key Features:

Although this was the least expressed conception, some elements in the students' data made their conception significantly different and more sophisticated than the two first ones as will be observed in this section.

The students expressing this conception referred to the historical study of language and the philosophical debates about the origins of language; however, they assessed the role of these lectures as secondary in the content of their first year Linguistics course (1). In fact, the students depicted in this category were able to distinguish between the study of language, i.e., Linguistics, the history of language. i.e., History and philosophical debates about language, i.e. Philosophy (2). This distinction was not perceived by the students in categories A and B. Therefore, students' confusion between Linguistics as a science and philosophical debates was not observed in the students holding conception C. As an illustration, S12 was able to distinguish Linguistics from Traditional Grammar in her written response:

Linguistics is the modern term given to what used to be called 'traditional grammar' in the classical period (2). It is the discipline that studies the language in a scientific way.

S12 further clarified:

The study of language shifts from philosophy to science. It is concerned about phonetics, semantics, and morphology (2). It has many disciplines,

such as applied linguistics... it is a mixture of theory and science which differentiates it from the other disciplines such as history and philosophy.(1)

Another example taken from the interview with S28 exemplifies a conception of Linguistic emphasizing similar as S12 key features. Here is his answer when he was asked what he understood linguistics to be:

**S28:** Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It is about all what concerns language (1), its origins and how it developed, how it is analyzed (1). The linguists were trying to analyze their languages how they are made, what is the meaning of the words and sentences, and how the sentences are made, and also the morphology (2).

Besides, contrary to the conceptions A and B, we could observe the students' interest in the content of the course of Linguistics (4), in particular, the information related to the analysis of languages. The students were observed to have managed making inferences about the importance of linguistic information beyond what was directly taught (5). In other words, they tried to raise questions concerning the meaning and objective of the content of the lectures as shown in this extracts:

The most interesting things I remember in linguistics (4) last year was when we did the analysis of meaning how to call it (...) semantics and also morphology. We could learn how languages like English, and French and Arabic are different (5). (S28)

Thanks to Linguistics I know how Arabic is different from other languages (5). It can tell how languages differ (5).(S15)

It tries to depict the diversity of language (5).(S12)

The same themes can be extracted from the interview with **S28**, in which we can notice how the student could retain information about linguistic analysis (5) not necessarily triggered by assessment demands:

**S28:** [...] I remember it (morphology) was interesting, it was the most interesting lesson (4).

**Inter:** What was interesting about morphological analysis?

**S28 :** It was interesting [...]. The teacher showed us how the words can be, can be made I mean what is the form of the words, and they change the meaning of the sentences if they change a prefix or[...] you know she gave us many examples not just of English but of French and Arabic (5), and we did exercises about it.

The above illustrations also reflect the students' personal interest in linguistic analysis, which seemed to have raised the interest of the students holding this category, and unlike students in the previous category they tended to find the topics related to the analysis of language accessible to them (6). The content of Linguistics was not associated with the Here is an example taken from the interviews with **S15** and **S12** respectively:

The teacher always gave us handouts and activities, especially in the second semester I liked the module. It was not difficult (6) (S15)

Last year, in the beginning of the year I was afraid of the module, because it was new and I never heard about it before. But after that I was always present and (4). I tried to understand what the teacher explains so I can say that I could understand the lessons and I now I don't find it difficult at all. (S12)

In sum, the students within this category, expressed an understanding of Linguistics more holistically instead of limiting it to a few lectures and topics. This allowed them to sort out the most relevant pieces of information from those that are less directly relevant. Their view of linguistics learning is more holistic and less passive, yet not fully developed. In this Category, the students acknowledged the role of analyzing language in linguistics but at the same time were unclear about the objective behind the linguistic analysis. The themes emerging from this conception can be summarized as follows:



- The students acknowledged Linguistics as a subject distinct from history and philosophy.
- Linguistic knowledge was useful as it enabled them to understand the difference between various languages.
- The students' understanding reflected a more global understanding of their linguistics lectures.

This was not the most sophisticated understanding of Linguistics; a few other students expressed a more developed conception as will be seen in the following section.

### **3.2.3- Category D: Linguistics as Critically Reflecting about Languages**

#### **i) Description of the Category:**

This is the most extensive category held by only five students (S2, S16, S19, S34, and S36). Linguistics is understood more globally not just about history of language and linguistic analysis, but as being a means of reflection over language beyond the information provided by the teacher during the lectures (1). Linguistic knowledge allows them to reflect over not just the English language but also, other languages including their own native language(s) (2). For the students holding this conception, knowledge is not simply transmitted from the teacher to the students; it is rather conceived as constructed when they personally reflect over the information received. The following are selected illustrations of this conception based on the students' written responses:

Every human speaks at least one language. I think that Linguistics is a science dealing with sounds, words, and grammar descriptions (1). Linguistics helps us to know more about our own language (2). (S16)

When we learn the development and analysis of language (1) in reality they are helping us to understand our own. (2) (S36)

**i) Key Features:**

The students in this category did not limit their understanding of Linguistics to specific lectures, but instead they appeared to be looking at the content of linguistics in their prior-experience more globally. Said differently, the students built their conception of Linguistics based on their understanding of the whole course, not just a few lectures (1). Besides, common to all the students in this category is that they expressed their understanding of Linguistics differently from the students in the previous categories in that they did not necessarily relate it to the definition learnt by heart in the first year “Linguistics is the scientific study of language”, instead, they expressed a deeper understanding of this statement. Referring to linguistics as “a science” was not merely rehearsed, it was understood. This can be best illustrated through this extract taken from the written response of S19 and S2:

Linguistics is the science of language. It is about the systems of languages (2): the words, sentences, and sounds (1). **(S19)**

In this extract we can notice the students’ tendency to related Linguistics to various lectures related to linguistic themes such as morphology, syntax, and phonetics. Interestingly, S19 used the term “systems”, which may suggest that she managed to grasp the complexity of language based on her understanding of various linguistic lectures. This can be also observed in an extract of S2:

Linguistics is about everything that has to do with language (2). It (Linguistics) is a science that teaches us how languages develop in history, how people make sentences, and express meaning, how words are made (1). It also teaches us the importance of meaning in languages (1).

One of the main themes that makes this category distinguished from the previously identified categories was the students' reflection about the purpose of the teacher and the linguistic information acquired in the course as well (3). This reflection allowed them to obtain a broadened and more complex understanding of the linguistic knowledge, which was not explicitly stated in the course (4). The following extracts exemplify these themes:

I think Linguistics is a field which concerns language (3). It studies language words, sentences, pronunciation and phonology and phonetics. Thanks to this analysis, we can understand the difference between writing and speaking (4).

This extract from the interview with S36 is a typical example:

**S36:** There was a shift from philosophy to the scientific study (3).

**Inter:** What was this scientific study?

**S36:** The study of language (3).

In this extract the students was able to observe the purpose of the historical information as an important step to understand what the scientific study of language, non-historical and objective. Interestingly, these students tried to relate the linguistic information to their native language(s) (5).

S36 further explained:

**S36:** For me, Linguistics developed our critical thinking about our own language (3). That was also the objective of my teacher last year (3). She wanted us to understand this miracle which is language (4)".

**Inter:** Okay, can you tell me more about what you understood?

**S36:** I could understand that Linguistics is not just about grammar and pronunciation (4); it's more about the human beings and how they communicate with each other (4), even in our own language (5). [...] When we understand Linguistics we can understand how we use our own language and we are communicating with people (5).

The content of Linguistics for the students in this category is more than unrelated bits of information about language. It is conceived as interesting in that it enabled them to raise questions related to language beyond what was taught in the classroom. This was even more striking in this interview extract with S34:

Linguistics is more than just a module; when you understand the past, you understand the present and future (4). Linguistics allows us to know what the people thought, what was their way of thinking, not just the language, their culture, way of thinking (4). (...) Also we get to know ourselves (4).

In this extract, unlike the students identified in Category A and B, this student is not listing the lectures or topics she studied in her first year Course of Linguistics. Instead, she is expressing her own point of view of what Linguistics might be, reflecting an attempt to clearly consider the information received in the Course instead of merely storing information to be reproduced later in the exams. The same tendency to reflect over the linguistic information can also be observed in this selected extract by S19:

When we learn these systems, we become aware of not just the English language but also our own language (5).**(S19)**

Summarizing this category, we can say that the students holding this conception do not view learning Linguistics in terms of accumulating knowledge transmitted by the teacher. This was observed when all of these students avoided listing the different contents of their first year course of

Linguistics, which would have reflected a surface way of approaching the study of linguistics. Rather, they selected what they believed was relevant to describing linguistics. In addition, they were ready to voice their reflections on what they were taught, reflecting therefore the ability of the students to build a broader and personal understanding of the first year course of linguistics. For all of these students, it was already important to think of the application of the learnt linguistic knowledge on their own language.

The following features made this category different from the others discussed above:

- The study of Linguistics is understood holistically and not limited to specific lectures.
- Linguistic knowledge is found to be useful because it enhances critical thinking about language.
- The content of linguistics is interesting and needs to be questioned.

Having presented all the data for the prior-conceptions of studying Linguistics, it seems now crucial to consider the outcome space, to which we turn next.

### **3.2.5- The Outcome Space for the Prior-Conceptions of Studying Linguistics:**

The analysis of the students' written responses and their interviews revealed the way linguistics was conceived by the students. In this section, we are going to see how the various categories could be structurally related despite their various meaning previously discussed (Akerlind, 2005). In other words, the outcome space that has stemmed out of the various identified categories of description. To this aim, the following table illustrates the outcome space for the students' prior-conceptions of linguistics learning.

Based on the data analyzed above it was observed that the participants expressed their conceptions of the study of linguistics based on their understanding of to three interrelated aspects of linguistics study:

- Their understanding of Linguistics as a subject matter.
- Their understanding the linguistic knowledge received during the first year course of Linguistics, and
- The objective of the linguistics course content

Having analyzed the data to depict the student' prior-conceptions of Linguistics study, we shall now present these categories in the outcome space.

**Table 3.3: The Outcome Space for the Prior-Conceptions of the Study of Linguistics**

	<b>Category A</b>	<b>Category B</b>	<b>Category C</b>	<b>Category D</b>
<b>Understanding of linguistics as a subject of study</b>	It is the historical and philosophic study of language. Understanding linguistics is limited to only a few lectures of their first year course content.	It is a theoretical analysis of English. It contributes to the students' development of the English language skills.	It is the analysis of language. It proves the students with the basis of analysis of any language in to different levels of language (ie. Phonetically, syntactically, semantically, etc...)	It is a personal reflection over how languages, including one's language, works.

<b>Understanding of linguistic knowledge</b>	It is to accumulate knowledge about the history of language and linguistics	It is to comprehend and remember the theory behind the mechanism of the English language.	It is to see the knowledge as a whole and to assess what is directly relevant and what is peripheral for the study of language. The received information is not simply to be retained, but it should be used for language analysis also.	It is to build a holistic understanding of what language is, and to personally reflect over the functions and mechanisms of languages. The knowledge studied is personally related to the students.
<b>Objective of the linguistics course content</b>	It is the quantitative increase in knowledge about historical facts about language and linguistics.	Acquisition of facts which could be used when necessary in the future and/or in other modules about language skills.	It provides information needed for describing and analyzing different languages, not just English.	To provide information and knowledge essential to reflect over and question the way one's language works.

In the next section, we shall present and analyze the semi-structured interviews to extract the students' prior-approaches.

### **3.3- Analysis of the Interviews: Categories of Description of the Prior-Approaches to the Study of Linguistics:**

According to Biggs (1997), a learning approach is a combination of a learning **strategy** and a **motive**. The learning strategy refers to what the student does and the students' motive is the intention behind the use of that learning strategy. The analysis of the students' interviews in the present investigation focused on these two aspects to come out with the categories of description

that would describe the students' prior-approaches to the study of linguistics. Thus, each category is constituted in terms of a strategy and an underlying intention. The students' statements regarding their own roles and those of their teachers' in studying Linguistics stood as central themes in the analysis of the interviews data. The analysis of the students' interviews revealed that the students' prior-approaches to learning fell into one of these categories:

### **3.3.1- Category A: Memorizing Isolated Pieces of Information with the Intention to Reproduce them in any Future Assessment**

#### **i) Description of the Category:**

In this category, the students approached the study of Linguistics by attending the lectures, listening carefully to the teacher and taking as many notes as possible, and then summarized their notes to be reproduced in the end of term test and exam. The notes taken were not necessarily selected or thought of, i.e., the notes were taken randomly. They seemed to be *interested in accumulating pieces of information* without necessarily understanding the link between them. In fact, understanding the linguistic information or developing their knowledge about language was not a priority for them. The students in this category, also tended to receive and store the information transmitted by the teacher passively. That is to say, it was not important for these students to be active or to participate in the classroom discussions or activities; for them, this could have hindered the process of taking notes which was crucial for their studies. In fact, the students holding this approach had no motivation to study linguistics as they did not understand the point of studying this module, except to obtain a pass mark.

The teacher for the students in this category was the main source of knowledge they could rely on in their linguistic studies. It was not important to question the knowledge transmitted by the teachers or attempt to relate the different pieces of information; the fact of memorizing their notes was enough in their studies. These students typically expressed difficulties



understanding the objectives of the course in general. The following extracts illustrate this category:

As soon as she keeps on repeating the same information, I take it down. I know that it's gonna be in the exam and for the lesson to study. (S3)

I used to attend, concentrate one hour and a half without blinking my eyes but couldn't understand. (S27).

### **i) Strategies:**

The students in this category reported having relied mostly on three main strategies: taking notes (1), summarizing (2), and memorizing (3), which were reported as being necessary for studying linguistics. Yet, what characterizes this category is that the students appeared to have picked up pieces of information that were not necessarily understood (4). This can be typically illustrated by these interviews extracts:

**S9:** Last year, I attended the lesson of Linguistics (1) and I was always taking notes (2), after that I tried to organize all the notes in my copybook (2).

**Inter:** Were you taking notes of the ideas you understood?

**S9:** No, no, I was taking notes of everything, like everything she (the teacher) says. After that I try to understand when I summarize (2) (...).

**Inter:** You said you had to summarize the information you were taking in the lessons.

**S9:** Yes.

**Inter:** Can you explain why?

**S9:** I told you we were studying many things, most of them were difficult (4). So, yeah, I had to summarize everything in order to memorize the lessons easily (3).

Another interview extract with S30, also illustrates the main strategies in this category:

**S30:** In Linguistics, I had to assist (attend) all the lessons in order to take notes (1), I could not understand directly from the handouts (4).

**Inter:** Okay, Can you explain the way you were taking notes?

**S30:** I follow the teacher and concentrate and take notes and take notes (1), if I miss something I may be lost after when I revise for the exam.

**Inter:** Can you explain what you did with those notes?

**S30:** Yes, well, I took the ideas that the teacher was explaining and try to summarize them (2).

**Inter:** When you were summarizing your notes, were you trying to use your own words or simply copy down what the teacher said literally?

**S30:** I try to use my own words, but not always, because it's hard, sometimes I don't understand well (4), so I just write what the teacher said exactly and I memorize everything (3).

In addition, students in this category commonly complained about and struggled both with the linguistic concepts (5) and the workload of the linguistics lectures (6). The following interview extract of S9 illustrates these themes of this category:

(...) There are many ideas that were somehow (6) difficult to graspeach lesson (5) we had new words and new ideas (6), it was the most complicated module last year (5).

Similar themes arouse out of the interview with S18:

**S18:** The module of linguistics contained a lot of information that I did not grasp (5).

**Inter:** Did you find the information difficult?

**S18:** Not really, it was not difficult, but I don't how to say it (...) it was too much (6), we had to memorize many new terms and definitions (6), and sometimes I get lost (5).

According to Marton and Biggs (1993), this feeling of being overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the information delivered in the lectures is typically observed among students with a surface approach to learning. It also reflects the students' overreliance on their teacher's explanations and lack the problem solving learning strategies (Marton and Biggs, *ibid*). Considering the teacher as the main source of knowledge (7) was a common theme among the students in this category. This can be illustrated in this interview extract:

When I tried to make my own lessons with my notes, it did not work, because I did not understand (4). I tried to ask her (the teacher) questions but when I raised my hand she say; "let me finish" but when I go back, I forgot the idea (7). (S27)

In addition, the students in this category were too depended on the teacher, who was observed as the only source of knowledge in studying linguistics. Even understanding for them was not a personal accomplishment, but instead directly linked to the information transmitted by the teacher, as can be seen in this extract:

**S35:** I tried to understand.

**Inter:** How?

**S35:** Take notes of the things she would say (1).

**Inter:** uhm...

**S35:** Also there were handouts, she gave us handouts.

**Inter:** What did you do with the handouts?

**S35:** She read the handouts and explained them and I was taking notes (1).

**Inter:** How did you find the information that the teacher explained?

**S35:** I don't know, I just take notes (1) we had a lot of information. After, I try to memorize, I put them in my copybook and memorize them (3).

**Inter:** Did your teacher ask you to memorize them?

**S35:** No, no... uhm... but what I should do? I don't understand(...) I mean I understand some information but the majority is hard (6)... I will have zero if I don't memorize them (3).

The last statement, in this interview extract, is quite significant as the student naturally evoked the fear of being assessed in this module. The assessment demands and obtaining pass grade remains a recurrent theme in the majority of the extracts. The students are mostly thinking about reproducing the information in any assessment occasion. This theme is elaborated in relation to the motives, or intentions of the students.

In addition, the students in this category often expressed difficulties understanding the course objectives as a whole (8) and inability to perceive the course or the teachers' objectives (9), as illustrated in this extract taken from her written response:

Last year, linguistics was a difficult module (8). When I was studying I was asking myself why they say this is important (9) (S3)

S7 tended to associate the activity of note-taking and memorizing not only with comprehension difficulties but also with lack of interest in the lecture. The following extract by S7 illustrates this point:

I took the title and do research on internet and make a lesson with my own words, summarizing it. If I understand I'm happy, if not, I memorize the handouts (9).

## **ii) Intention:**

The students' main intention for studying linguistics was to collect and retain information in preparation for any future test or exam in linguistics. This appeared when the students in this category constantly related note-taking and memorizing with taking the exams (1) without necessarily understanding the information being memorized (2) often associated with a

perception of the lectures as being difficult or complicated (3), as illustrated below:

Last year in linguistics, there was a lot of information, and it was complicated (2). like you don't always understand (2) the information, yes, and so what I do is to write what the teacher was saying, or I would forget. I would memorize the maximum (2), I had no choice, because if the teacher asks us to write a paragraph in the exam (3), I cannot, so I had to memorize the information (1). (S5)

The students' intention while taking notes was not to develop their understanding of the linguistic concepts or to construct knowledge about linguistics. Their intention was mainly to collect information directly transmitted by the teacher (4) to be reproduced in the end of term test and exam. The main motive is to study the course with minimal effort often justified by the heavy workload of the course content (5). This is illustrated in the following interview extract with S7:

**S7:** There is a lot of information, you can't just read everything (5). you should memorize (. I take notes; I go home and rewrite my own summary, with simple words. I don't like difficult words. I prefer simple words.

**Inter:** Did you used to make research to simplify the language?

**S7:** Exactly.

**Inter:** Why did you.....(interrupted)

**S7:** To develop the lesson?

**Inter:** Yes, and did you try to understand better?

**S7:** No, I do it to simplify the words.

**Inter:** Why did you need to simplify the words?

**S7:** To memorize it, to memorize it easily, and in the exam the teacher does not like to see the words of the handouts. She would give bad marks.

### **3.3.2- Category B: Understanding and Memorizing Information with the Intention to Prepare for a Future Assessment**

The students in this category aimed at obtaining good grades to be able to pass their exams easily. For this, the students relied mostly on attending the lectures regularly, taking notes, and making out of class research of what they believed would be important for their exams. Contrary to category A students, the notes they were taking in the classroom were not random or meaningless for them; this is because ***their main intention was to look for key information*** in the teacher's explanations to be best prepared for any future assessment. Said differently, they look for any explanations that the teacher emphasizes in the lectures which might be used in the exams and tests. In this category, the teacher was the main source of information as he/she was the one who designs the exam and grades the exam and text papers. Yet, for them it was not enough to rely exclusively on the teacher's explanations, if they wanted to guarantee passing their end of term exams; they typically resort to doing extra research outside the classroom about the information given by the teacher in order to increase their chances in obtaining good grades.

Understanding and Memorizing the information that they gathered both inside and outside the classroom were also a dominant strategies in this category. For effective retention of information, the students were conscious that ***understanding should precede memorization***, which distinguishes this category from the previous one. Thus, understanding the lectures was necessary for these students; however, they do not seem to be particularly interested by the knowledge they gather while studying linguistics as they are mainly motivated by obtaining the pass grade. As an illustration, the following extract is selected:

When the teacher is, how to say, focusing so I take notes, so I say may be this will be on a test, and also things closely related to the lesson (S22)

The students adopting this approach appeared to be more comfortable with the course content in the sense that they do not feel the same confusion about the content and objectives of the module as expressed by the students in category A. Here is a typical illustration by S2:

Last year, the teacher explained the module, so we had an idea about what we were going to learn.(S2)

The same feeling was aired by S11:

I was conformable with the module last year, it was easy... I used to take notes and listen to the explanations. I catch the most repeated information.

#### **i) Strategies:**

The main strategy adopted by the students in this category was to take notes, summarizing the lectures and memorize the information transmitted by the teacher (1). The difference between this category and category A is that the students tended to consider understanding (2) as a necessary before memorizing, as shown in this statement:

Usually, I always ask questions to understand better (2), take notes (1), and at the end summarize my lesson (1), and then the teacher gave us handouts. (S22)

Contrary to Category A, the students depicted in this category appeared to do effort to find solutions for their comprehension problems in Linguistics. This is illustrated in the following extract taken from the interview with S2:

Last year, the teacher was giving handouts before the lecture. At first I didn't know how to deal with the handouts, how to take notes, because it was like a new module, so at first, I wasn't taking notes. But I realized that I forget almost everything (1). The majority of the information the teacher gives orally, that was not included in the handouts. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> term, I started taking notes (1), or if the teacher gives us handouts before, I read it, underline the words I'm in trouble with, and try to search (2). Because generally, I'm not

satisfied with the handouts, like, I try to search for more details (2).  
(S2)

In addition, compared to the category A, the students in category B were selective in taking their notes. In fact the strategy adopted by these students is not simply note-taking, but rather seeking key information in their teacher's explanations (3). That is to say, they listened to the teacher carefully and paid attention to any cues which suggest that the information might be important for passing the exam (4). This is well illustrated in this extract when S28 was asked about the reason why she relied mostly on note-taking in studying linguistics:

It's very important to take notes, because you know the teacher asked questions about what she explains in the lesson. So, I concentrated with the teacher (3) and try to guess what are the things that are important and that are going to be in the test (4).

These students also emphasized the role of the teacher as the main source of information in the linguistics lectures (5), as stated clearly by S6:

If we don't take notes, we miss so much (1). The teacher mentions many things that are not on the handouts (5). (S6)

Besides, the students holding this approach focused on aspects of the lectures that would increase their chances of obtaining good grades when assessed by their teacher. As a result they developed an awareness of what the teachers might find important for assessment (6). The student 2 illustrated this with her description of her teacher's typical behavior when explaining important information:

So also, she (the teacher) rarely writes on the board. When she writes, we know that is important (6).



Furthermore, the category B students seemed to have been aware about their teachers' demands the day of the exam not just in terms of information, but also language. S11 expressed the following:

I think the teacher of linguistics told us don't write what's on the handouts word by word. So whenever they want us to write as students, they want to see the information and writing (6).

Therefore, these students seemed to have been interested mainly in seeking cues in the teacher's explanations that would be indicative of the exam questions content. Entwistle (1997) referred to these students as the "cue-seekers". What was their intention then?

## **ii) Intention:**

The main intention of the students holding this approach was to collect enough information to pass the end of term test and exam. They use the strategies of note-taking, summarizing lectures, and even classroom discussions with intention to increase their chances to pass the linguistics exams easily (1). These extracts from the interviews with S8 and S22 illustrates this best:

Obviously, when I summarize, I would memorize it, so when there is an exam, I'd use that (1). (S8)

I take notes in the lesson and also I participated in the activities because when I do the activities it helps me understand better and memorize also, so in the exam I can remember the informations easily (2). (S22)

As can be observed from S22 interview extract, understanding becomes crucial for memorizing the information studied in the. This makes the intention different from that expressed by the students in Approach A, in which the students tended to memorize information even when it was not

fully understood. These cue-seekers deliberately expressed their intention to seek understanding (1) as it was believed to be a major way to understand and answer the exams questions. In addition, improving their writing and paraphrasing skills to obtain good grades (2). These intentions are illustrated in the following extract:

Our teacher always told us do not copy all information of the handouts, so I had to understand (1) the handouts and to make my own summary, you know I write the handouts with my own words (2). (S30)

Thus, students' efforts were all directed to improve their grades in linguistics and not necessarily improving their linguistic knowledge. However, the students showed an interest in the content of the linguistics lectures as a result of their efforts to seek better grades.

We are going to see in the next category that a few other students utilized more advanced strategies with different intentions in Category C.

### **3.3.3- Category C: Understanding and Relating Pieces of Information with the Intention to have Holistic Understanding**

The study of linguistics in this category is characterized by the students' interest in the knowledge of the course content. The students expressed their curiosity to seek more understanding of the concepts and the course content. The students deliberately related the linguistic information that they study in lecture in order to obtain a holistic understanding of the course. In other words, for these students, understanding the linguistic knowledge cannot be achieved if it is not understood in relation to the course content as a whole.

The main objective of these students was to increase understanding of the knowledge they are learning during the course holistically and not in a fragmented way. They expressed their dissatisfaction with merely

understanding of pieces of information separately. To achieve this objective, the students attempted to find the link information they gathered in the various lectures. The students holding this approach often used the verbs 'to combine', 'to link', and 'to find relationship' when describing their prior-experience of studying Linguistics. This conception can be illustrated by the following interview extract of S1 and S36 respectively:

When we take notes, we actually understand what the teacher says, what's on the handout. So I combine them together and try to understand about everything and what the lecture is about. (S1)

When I revise my lessons for the exam, I take the summaries of each one to understand the definitions and the examples and so on. And also I try to see many lessons together, and I understand better because you know sometimes there is a relationship between two lessons and it's better to put them together in one summary. (S36)

#### **i) Strategies:**

The students in this category typically used the strategy of linking information they receive in the linguistics course together and building a holistic understanding of the course in general. For this reason, they did not simply take notes and summarize the lectures using their own words (1), but also resorted to linking the information they receive in various lectures in order to build a better understanding of the course in general (2). Some of these students attempted to link the knowledge transmitted by the teacher either in a form of handouts or explanations during the lectures, with the students' own research outside the classroom in order to understand the lectures(3). This is well illustrated in the following statement by S6:

In the second semester, I started taking notes, or if the teacher gives us handouts, I read or, underline the words (1), I'm in trouble with, and try to search (2). Because, generally, I'm not satisfied with the handouts like, I try to search for more details (3)..... at home, I try to combine what the teacher said with what's written on the handouts (2).

What is interesting in this extract is that S6 used problem-solving to get over her comprehension issues in the first term; indeed, she had not been not satisfied with merely note-taking and summarizing lectures in preparing for the end of term assessment, but instead she sought more understanding using the strategy of linking various pieces of information to achieve more satisfactory understanding.

Other students in this category attempted to link the various pieces of information they receive different lectures of the linguistics course. Here is an example of this strategy:

I tried to find strategies to link the lectures to better memorize the information because there are many, many details (S12)

The students in this category were typically comfortable with the linguistic information and paid attention concerned with the objectives of the teacher. They also sought to understand the purpose of that information and question its relevance to their studies. For example S19 made this statement:

The teacher tells us she won't ask us about a specific thing in the lecture, try to link the information, like to compare mainly to see if the students understood.

S 36 also expressed her concern with the objectives of the linguist knowledge:

"There were lessons about phonology and phonetics, we learned the difference between them and for me for the first time I know the difference between them, before I didn't know that phonetics is not phonology, I thought it was the same thing. Also we studied semantics and morphemes. There were a lot of information yes too many information... umm...but we have studied all that because the language has many parts: grammar, phonetics, phonology, semantics and all these. So, to understand how languages work, we have to understand all this information".

ii) **Intention:**

The central intention of the students depicted in this category is not merely increasing knowledge, but also to increasing understanding (1) and reorganization of the knowledge received in various lectures in a way that it becomes meaningful to them (2). In fact, they expressed the need to build a global understanding of the course through understanding the link between the various pieces of information as well as different lectures (3). For example, S18 explained how she found it important to first understand the knowledge she obtained from her teacher and link it to that she could find in the internet when seeking more information about the lectures content; and second to link the contents of different lectures to reach understanding:

**S18:** I tried to understand the handouts and what the teacher says (1). She explained many things, it's not easy, so I was obliged to search for information, and compare between what the teacher said and what I searched for in the internet, and prepare summaries of everything(2). Sometimes it is not easy to understand one lesson; I have to wait for the next lesson to understand better (3)

**Inter:** Why did you find it difficult to understand every lesson separately?

**S18:** No, I understood everything, but the lessons are linked, so yes, I think you have to grasp everything to understand better (3)

The same intention was expressed by S34:

I cannot understand one lesson without understanding the other (3). I make research and write summaries the lessons to understand it very well (1), and if I don't understand, I ask the teacher questions in the next lesson (1).

In this extract, it seems that S34 that her role in understanding the lectures is crucial, which might reflect her belief that understanding is first her duty and not the teacher's, as it was the students depicted in category A.

For her, she can resort to the teacher in case she did the necessary effort to understanding herself but still found the information difficult.

In the next selected extract, S12 expressed a similar tendency to look for any logical link between the various lectures, and how it was crucial for her 'to combine' the information that the teacher gives in various lectures to understand the linguistic information. In addition, the students in this category seem not to be satisfied with merely understanding the content of each lesson; instead they tended to ask themselves questions beyond what the teacher presents directly in the lectures (4). This theme is illustrated in S12 interview extract:

I understood the lectures, but when I tried to combine the information (3) I ask myself 'what is the point of all this(4)?'And this is difficult. For instance,in the beginning of the year, we studied the origins of language and the history of languages. It was easy and I understood everything (1),but I said 'what is the point of this? (4)'I did not grasp why we were learning all that (4) , but in the end of the semester, there was the lecture of'what is linguistics' and that it is scientific study of language (3) . So I understood that in the beginning it was just an introduction and after than we studied more information concerning linguistics (3) and this is linguistics; we study history, philosophy, and everything, you know everything about language (4).

In this category, the students expressed the most advanced approach with strategies and intentions among the students as will be seen in the outcome space for the prior-approaches to studying Linguistics.

#### **3.3.4- The Outcome Space for the Students' Prior-approaches to the Studying Linguistics:**

The analysis of data presented in the previous section revealed a set of hierarchically organized categories of description of the approaches to the

study of linguistics that the students brought to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year experience of learning. These are presented in the table below.

**Table 3.4 : The Outcome Space for the Students' Prior-approaches to the Studying Linguistics**

	<b>Category A</b>	<b>Category B</b>	<b>Category C</b>
<b>Category of description</b>	It is based on accumulating isolated pieces of information in a passive way during the lectures directly transmitted by the teacher. Understanding is not necessary since this approach is characterized by the students' lack of interest in the linguistic knowledge and motivation in studying linguistics.	It is characterized by the students' interest in selecting the notes and memorizing the information that would increase their chances to pass the linguistics texts and exams. Understanding the information given by the teacher is considered as necessary.	It is based on relating all the linguistic information transmitted in the lectures and those obtain from the students' personal research in order to reach a global understanding of the course. They seek to understand the meaning behind the information transmitted
<b>Students' roles</b>	Passive students whose role is to accumulate isolated pieces of information and memorize them without necessarily understanding. They have comprehension difficulties and lack interest in the knowledge they receive in the linguistic course.	Cue-seekers who are interested in depicting any cues in the teacher's talk that would indicate the type and content of the exam questions. Students show an ability to manage the workload, and find solutions for their understanding difficulties.	Meaning-seekers who are personally interested in the linguistic information. Students are active students who seek understanding both inside and outside the classroom.
<b>Strategy</b>	Over-reliance on taking and memorizing notes directly transmitted by the teacher. The students did not do any further efforts to elaborate or make any extra research to understand the information given by the teacher.	Taking notes in the lectures judged to be important for the tests and exams. Reinforcing these notes with any extra information to be better prepared for any future assessment is also one of the main strategies. Understanding and then memorizing the information collected in preparation for the teachers' assessment is an important feature for this approach	In addition to note-taking and summarizing, the students rely on liking the information gathered during various lectures. Simply taking notes and memorizing isolated pieces of information would not be satisfactory for the students holding this approach.

<b>Intention</b>	The students aim to reproduce information transmitted by the teacher with minimal effort.	The objective of the students holding this approach is maximizing their chances to pass the linguistic end of term text and exam.	Understanding meaning of the information gathered during the course and finding a relationship between the various pieces of information.
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The data analysis revealed that, in addition to the students' intentions and strategies used, which were the focus of the interviews, issues in relation to their roles in Linguistics classroom were constantly raised. Therefore, the outcome space contains these three main aspects of the students' prior-experience of studying Linguistics.

### **3.4 -Presentation and Analysis of the Questionnaire:**

This section is devoted to the presentation of the data that derived from the questionnaire used in this study. As already explained in Chapter Three the questionnaire used in this study was an adapted version of the shortened version of ASSIST, developed and tested for reliability and validity by the authors in several tertiary contexts (Entwistle, McCune, and Tait; 2013). These authors argued that the short versions show acceptable agreement with the longest version. In addition to the authors of this questionnaire, this instrument was replicated and adapted in various tertiary contexts, and given that only few wording changes were made to this questionnaire for this study, no validation of its scales was made. As for the method of analysis, it is discussed in what follows.

#### **3.4.1- Method of Analysis:**

The questionnaire aimed at obtaining a picture of the students' orientations for the deep, surface, or strategic approaches. It consisted of three sections, each contained different number of items. The total number items of the



questionnaire were 32. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought the statements describing their view and actual perception of learning and their behavior. This was done by the respondent circling the number on a Likert Scale, which contains number corresponding to responses, as shown below.

- I strongly agree with the statement= 5 points
- I somewhat agree with the statement= 4 points
- I am neutral or undecided (neither agree or disagree)= 3 points
- I somewhat disagree with the statement=2 points
- I strongly disagree with the statement=1 point

Based on this scale, circling number 5 indicated that the student the statement was very true for his learning, while 1 indicated that it was not true at all. Therefore, each item refers to a factor associated with either deep or surface learning. Section B includes factors associated with a further type of learning called strategic learning, and so unlike sections A and C, Factor analysis for section B is based on three dimensions: Deep (D) Surface (S) and Strategic (T).

Taking into consideration the Likert scale of this questionnaire, the analysis of all sections went through the same stages. First I had to make the total number of the respondents of items on a scale (1-5). The number of the respondents obtained for each scale is weighted by the scale which corresponds to it; this is what is referred to as the weighted number. For example, if for item (a), 10 students responded that they Strongly Agreed, which on a Likert scale corresponds to (5), then the scale score for this item is (10\*5,) which is 50. The, the mean score for every item in every group had to be made, respecting the Likert Scale scoring system (1-5). Scores on the three main factors or approaches are formed by adding together the responses on the item for each scale. For verification and ease of analysis, percentages are

also used in the analysis of this questionnaire. Tables are used for better illustration of the results.

In what follows are the results obtained on every questionnaire section, then the findings are commented on in the final part of the questionnaire analysis.

### **3.4.2- Analysis of Section A: Conceptions of Learning**

This section contains 6 items related to conceptions of learning: three items a, b, and c, were worded in such a way so that the respondents' agreement would indicate a conception of learning as transmission of knowledge while the other 3 items d, e, and f, would indicate a conception of learning as involving personal understanding. As already mentioned in the questionnaire description, the three first items are related to a conception of learning supporting surface approach, while the rest of the items yield to a conception of learning encouraging deep approach. Table 7 provides an overview of the items and the conceptions of learning that they indicate.

**Table 3.5: Conceptions of Learning Items According to the Surface and Deep Dimensions**

<b>Conceptions of learning reflecting surface approach</b>	<b>Conceptions of learning reflecting deep approach</b>
1. The aim of learning is to memorize information taught by the teacher.	4. The aim of learning is to prepare the students for professional life.
2. The aim of learning is to acquire facts and information to build more knowledge about the subject matter.	5. The aim of learning is to understand the course content and being able to use in real life.
3. The aim of learning is to achieve high scores to get a degree.	6. The aim of learning is to develop one's personality.

It follows that the analysis is based on two dimensions: conception of learning as deep, and a conception of learning as surface. Similarly, the interpretation of the findings emphasized these two dimensions. In the analysis, for each item, scores were averaged first within each group to make the mean score for every item. Then, the mean for the items indicating the conception of learning as transmission of knowledge was made. The mean scores for the items associated with both a conception of learning as transmission of knowledge and as personal understanding were averaged for all respondents in the three groups. The table below shows the means across items for each of the two dimensions.

**Table 3.6: Item Means for the Conceptions of Learning Dimensions**

	<b>Surface conception of learning</b>	<b>Deep conception of learning</b>
<b>N</b>	40	40
<b>Mean</b>	3,30	3,91

As can be seen in this table, the average means scores for both dimensions are above the mid-point (out of 5) which is 2.50. This might suggest that the students across three groups scored high on both deep and surface learning conceptions. Despite that the scores on the dimension related to deep learning seem to slightly higher than that of surface learning, the difference cannot be said to be significant enough to make claims about the students' conception of learning as reflecting personal understanding. Consequently, further analysis had to be made in which the focus was laid on analyzing the scores for every factors item in order to see any significant difference between the scores on different items. The following tables report such results:

**Table 3.7: Item Means for Conceptions of Learning as Transmission of Knowledge**

<b>Items codes</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Means</b>
<b>a</b>	The aim of learning is to memorize information taught by the teacher.	<b>2,05</b>
<b>b</b>	The aim of learning is to acquire facts and information to build more knowledge.	<b>4,47</b>
<b>c</b>	The aim of learning is to achieve high scores to get a degree.	<b>3,40</b>

**Table 3.8: Item Means for Conceptions of Learning as Personal Understanding**

<b>Items codes</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Means</b>
<b>d</b>	The aim of learning is to prepare the students for professional life.	4,30
<b>e</b>	The aim of learning is to understand the course content and being able to use in real life.	3,97
<b>f</b>	The aim of learning is to develop one's personality.	3,47

Tables 5 and 6 show the means for every item separately along the two dimensions involved in Section A. The mean scores on the tables are the weighted average scores for each item for the sample. For the analysis of these scores, one would consider that every score average above 2,5 indicates an orientation towards the dimension it reflects. Means below 2,5 suggest that the sample is less likely to reflect the dimension that the item reflects. Therefore, the first observation one might make from the table above, is that all the means are above the average with the exception of item a (2,05). This item scoring the lowest average is related to the conception of learning as mainly about memorization of facts and information, hence, a surface conception of learning.

The average score 4 obviously indicates a strong orientation towards the learning conception it reflects. This is particularly the case for item 'b' which is related to a learning conception indicating surface approach. As shown in the table, the score average for this item is 4, 4 which is the highest among all items in both dimensions. However, although this mean score suggests a concern of the students towards conceiving learning as the acquisition of facts and building knowledge, the respondents in general cannot be said to have a strong orientation towards a conception of learning as transmission of knowledge. The other means scores for items 'd' and 'e' related to conception of learning as personal understanding are 4.21 and 3,97 respectively. This suggests that the populations' conceive learning as a vehicle for further development beyond the classroom.

It is also worth noting that a conception of learning as memorization of facts and information scored considerably lower than the other items in both dimensions. The results on tables 9 and 10 indicate that average score for item 'a' are significantly lower than the rest of the items, suggesting the population is far from conceiving learning as memorization of facts and information.

Based on these findings collected in the beginning of the study, the students seem to have conceived learning as being mainly about:

- Acquisition of more facts and knowledge.
- Preparation of professional life.
- The use of course content in real life.

A conception of learning as memorization of facts and information was relatively underscored and tends to be far from being the dominating conception of learning. However, it seems necessary to interpret these results in relation to the other two sections for better insights.

### **3.4.3- Analysis of Section B: Approaches to Learning**

This section contains 18 items; each refers to one of the three factors: Deep (D), Surface (S), or Strategic Approach (T). For each factor, there are 6 items worded in such a way that they indicate the orientation of the student towards that specific approach.

The analysis of the results of this section was based on the scoring scheme for three dimensions: deep approach, strategic approach, and surface approach. The students responded to the items by indicating their degree of agreement or disagreement on a scale (1-5). The average scores are formed by adding together the responses on the six items within each factor for all three groups. So, for ease of interpretation, each item in Section B was given a symbol or code which contains the approach it indicates, deep (D), strategic (T), or Surface (S), and at the same time the number of the item in that section which is 1-18. For example, item 1 in section B, indicates a surface approach (S), so it is referred to in the analysis as S1, while item 2 indicates the deep approach (D), and therefore is given the symbol D2.

The score scales for each item are then computed to have the average mean for each of the three approaches: this was done as follows:

- Deep approach (DA) = D2+D6+D10+D12+D15+D17.
- Strategic approach (TA) = T3+T5+T7+T9+T11+T13.
- Surface approach (SA) = S1+S4+S8+S14+S16+S18.

Tables below provide an overview of the final results obtained across the three groups.

**Table 3.9: Summary of the Means and Standard Deviation for Deep Approach**

Item code	Item	Means	SD
D2	When I'm reading handouts or my notes, I try to find out for myself exactly what the teacher means.	3,87	1,01
D6	Before tackling a classroom activity or homework, I first try to think about the purpose behind it.	2,97	1,36
D10	When I'm working on a new topic presented by the teacher for the first time, I try to think how all the ideas fit together.	3,40	1,25
D12	Often I find myself questioning things I hear in the lectures or read in related books.	3,52	1,21
D15	Ideas in lectures, handouts or related books and articles often make me constantly think about myself.	2,70	1,41
D17	When I read outside the classroom, I examine the details carefully to see how they fit in with what the lecturer explains.	3,77	1,18

**Table 3.10: Summary of the means and standard deviation for strategic approach**

Item codes	Items	Means	SD
T3	I organize my study time carefully to make the best use of it.	2,62	1,35
T5	I work steadily throughout the semester rather than leave it all until the last minute.	2,82	1,35
T7	I'm pretty good at studying whenever I need to.	3,75	1,10
T9	I put a lot of effort studying because I have to do well.	3,40	1,33
T11	I don't find it at all difficulty to motivate myself.	3,42	1,37
T13	I think I'm quite organized when it comes to revising for my exams.	3,15	1,40

**Table 3.11: Summary of the means and standard deviation for Surface approach**

Item code	Items	Means	SD
S1	I often have trouble in understanding the things I'm supposed to remember.	2,90	1,19
S4	Much of the work in the content modules is little interesting or relevant.	3,20	1,20
S8	Much of what I'm studying makes little sense for me: it's like unrelated bits and pieces.	2,07	0,94
S14	Often I feel there is a big amount of material we have to cope with.	5,17	6,03
S16	During lectures, I'm not really sure what's important to note, and so I take notes of all I can.	2,65	1,40
S18	I'm often not quite sure about whether I'll be able to cope with studying in the Department of English.	2,02	1,36

As indicated in the above tables, the lowest average means were those obtained for the surface items S8, S16, and S18. The average mean for the latter was actually the lowest. So, one might say that most of the students reported not being confused with to the content of linguistics. The means tend also to suggest that most of the students do not complain about the overwork in this course, and seem to be rather confident about coping with their studies. However, the results for item S14, which is about the work load, are significantly higher. This suggests that the majority of the students feel overwhelmed when it comes to coping with the amount of work in their linguistics learning. Another striking findings is that related to the relevance of the content of the students, as shown in the above table, the average mean for item S4 related to the extent to which the content of learning is perceived



as relevant is relatively high. This indicates that the extent of the students' interest in the content of linguistics is significantly low, which might be due to the lack of relevance perceived in the content of the subject.

The next important step was to make the average means for every approach for the whole population. The final findings for this section are summarized in the table below:

**Table 3.12: Summary of the means for learning approaches**

	<b>DeepApproach</b>	<b>StrategicApproach</b>	<b>Surface Approach</b>
<b>N</b>	40	40	40
<b>Mean</b>	3,37	3,19	3,00
<b>SD</b>	0,45	0,41	1,16

The deep approach has the highest mean score for the whole sample, which would seem to suggest that most students have some preference for personal learning and goal mastery. The items in this factor all were associated with learning to seek meaning and increase personal understanding. The mean for the strategic approach is slightly lower than that obtained for the deep approach. This would seem to suggest that achieving high scores in the course is crucial for most of the students. It should be noted that the strategic approach overlaps with those of the deep approach. The lowest mean was that of surface learning approach, it has a mean well below the other factors. Yet, it remains above the average (2,50) and so can be rather considered as high.

Based on the results presented above, there is a tendency of the population of this study was to engage in personal understanding of the content of the course rather than merely memorizing facts and information. The population seems to aspire for meaningful engagement in learning instead of accumulating knowledge of facts. Nevertheless, given that the

means for the three approaches was considerably high, it would be difficult to make conclusions about the students' orientations. In fact, more details were needed for better exploitation of the data, and so the percentages obtained for every item on each of the three dimensions were calculated and are presented as follows:

**Table 3.13: Percentages for items related to the deep dimension**

Items	SronglyAgree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	StronglyDisagree
D2	26,32%	51,58%	5,26%	15,79%	1,05%
D6	12,63%	38,95%	15,79%	25,26%	7,37%
D10	18,95%	45,26%	13,68%	18,95%	3,16%
D12	24,21%	47,37%	9,47%	13,68%	5,26%
D15	9,47%	28,42%	12,63%	28,42%	21,05%
D17	21,05%	55,79%	7,37%	10,53%	5,26%

Items	StronglyAgree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Stronglydisagree
T3	21,05%	23,16%	13,68%	30,53%	11,58%
T5	20,00%	31,58%	10,53%	27,37%	10,53%
T7	21,05%	44,21%	7,37%	24,21%	3,16%
T9	18,95%	49,47%	2,11%	23,16%	6,32%
T11	25,26%	31,58%	9,47%	24,21%	9,47%
T13	23,16%	33,68%	7,37%	26,32%	9,47%

**Table 3.14: Percentages for Strategic Items**

**Table 3.15: Percentages for item related to the surface approach**

Items	StronglyAgree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Stronglydisagree
S1	10,53%	38,95%	15,79%	31,58%	3,16%
S4	8,42%	37,89%	15,79%	29,47%	8,42%
S8	10,53%	20,00%	6,32%	41,05%	22,11%
S14	35,79%	49,47%	6,32%	9,47%	0,00%
S16	15,79%	25,26%	4,21%	34,74%	20,00%
S18	8,42%	21,05%	4,21%	25,26%	41,05%

The percentage in the tables above indicate that the students' responses lie between agreement and disagreement for most items, which might suggest that the majority of the students tend to avoid extreme agreement or disagreement. This is typical of most novice students who avoid the extreme scales.

As for the items related to each dimension, the percentages obtained under the deep approach seem to suggest that the majority of the students tend to agree with the statements under this dimension. The percentage for item D17 was the highest of all three factors. This is indicative of the fact that the students tend to examine the details of what they read outside the classroom, the students tend to think carefully about the lecturer's explanation.

In addition, one might say that the most striking results are those related to the deep items, in particular, items 15 and 17. As shown in this table, the percentages for Item D15 are strikingly identical for the scales 'Agree' and 'Disagree'. The percentages on the rest of the scales are slightly lower. This particular item (D15) tells about the extent to which the students

tend to think for them when they study both inside and outside of the classroom. It seems that less than half of the students agree with this way of learning.

As for the percentages obtained for item D17, they indicate a tendency in the population to engage in details of what they read at the same time relating that to what the teacher had explained in the classroom. This is, however, not in harmony with the results for D15 which clearly indicate that the students' agreement and disagreement is strikingly identical. In other words, the students who agree with item D17 were expected to agree with item D15, which is not the case in the findings above.

Comparing these findings of this questionnaire to the previous studies that adapted ASSIST, it can be noticed that the results obtained in the present study seem to rather different. In response to this it was necessary to analyze the responses obtained on every item, and observe relationship that might exist between the items whose scores are the highest means on agreement.

**Table 3.16: Mean averages for Section B of the questionnaire**

<b>Item num</b>	<b>Questionnaire items</b>	<b>Means</b>
<b>1</b>	Often I feel there is a big amount of material we have to cope with.	<b>4,11</b>
<b>2</b>	When I'm reading handouts or my notes, I try to find out for myself exactly what the teacher means.	<b>3,86</b>
<b>3</b>	When I read outside the classroom, I examine the details carefully to see how they fit with what the lecturer explains.	<b>3,76</b>
<b>4</b>	Often I find myself questioning things I hear in the lectures or read in related books.	<b>3,71</b>
<b>5</b>	When I'm working with a new topic presented by the teacher for the first time, I try to think how all ideas fit together.	<b>3,75</b>

<b>6</b>	I'm pretty good at studying whenever I need to.	<b>3,55</b>
<b>7</b>	I put a lot of effort studying because I have to do well	<b>351</b>
<b>8</b>	I don't find it at all difficult to motivate myself.	<b>3,38</b>
<b>9</b>	I think I'm quite organized when it comes to revising	<b>3,34</b>
<b>10</b>	Before tackling a classroom activity or homework, I first try to think about the purpose behind it.	<b>3,24</b>
<b>11</b>	I work steadily throughout the semester rather than leave it until the last minute.	<b>3,34</b>
<b>12</b>	I often have trouble in understanding the things I'm supposed to remember.	<b>3,23</b>
<b>13</b>	I organize my time carefully to make the best of it	<b>3,11</b>
<b>14</b>	Much of the work in the content modules is little interesting or relevant.	<b>3,08</b>
<b>15</b>	During lectures, I'm not really sure what's important to note.	<b>2,82</b>
<b>16</b>	Much of what I'm studying makes little sense for me: it's unrelated bits and pieces.	<b>2,55</b>
<b>17</b>	I'm pretty good at studying whenever I need to.	
<b>18</b>	I'm often not quite sure about whether I'll be able to cope with studying in the Department of English.	<b>2,30</b>

Table 18 provides a clearer picture of the students' orientations towards the study approaches. Having classified the items based on the score means from the highest to the lowest, one might confirm the previously made observations. The population seems to aspire for the deep learning, i.e. seeking meaning and understanding the materials for themselves. With the exception of item D14 classified as the highest in the list, the 4 first items belong to the deep construct of the questionnaire:

- *When I'm reading handouts or my notes, I try to find out for myself exactly what the teacher means.*
- *When I read outside the classroom, I examine the details carefully to see how they fit with what the lecturer explains.*
- *Often I find myself questioning things I hear in the lectures or read in related books.*
- *When I'm working with a new topic presented by the teacher for the first time, I try to think how all ideas fit together.*

This combination relates to **seeking meaning** in studying the meaning materials. The students seem to be motivated towards **content mastery**. However, this group of items are also combined with the questionnaire item S14, having the highest score mean in the whole Section B.

- *Often I feel there is a big amount of material we have to cope with.*

While this item is described as associated with surface learning, it does not describe lack of purpose and fear of failure. It rather reflects the students' lack of ability to monitor the amount of the materials learnt. As it is the particularly reflected in items:

- *Much of the work in the content modules is little interesting or relevant.*
- *During lectures, I'm not really sure what's important to note.*
- *Much of what I'm studying makes little sense for me: it's unrelated bits and pieces.*
- *I'm often not quite sure about whether I'll be able to cope with studying in the Department of English.*

This set of items has received fewer score than those reported in the first set. These items are obviously related to learning approach in a rather superficial way and lack of purpose. Despite the fact that the findings of Section B of the questionnaire seem to suggest that the students display a

rather deep approach to learning, one cannot conclude that this approach is readily available for these subjects. In fact, these findings need to be further interpreted in the light of the phenomenographic findings reported in the first section of this chapter. Before such discussion is provided, the data of final section of the questionnaire need to be presented.

### **3.4.4- Analysis of Section C: Conceptions of Teaching**

The last questionnaire section provides data that complements that collected in section A concerning conception of learning. It addressed the respondents' conceptions of teaching along the deep and surface dimensions. Following the same line of data analysis, the analysis will be carried by item. In addition each item's results will be considered depending on whether it refers to a deep or surface conception of teaching. Each dimension contains 4 items. The score scales for each item were computed to have the average mean for each of the three approaches. This was done as follows:

- *Deep conception of teaching*=  $b+c+f+g$
- *Surface conception of teaching*=  $a+d+e+h$

The questionnaire data collected from 40 respondents is summarized in this table.

**Table 3.16: Item means for the conceptions of teaching dimensions**

	<b>Deep conception of teaching</b>	<b>Surface conception of teaching</b>
<b>N</b>	40	40
<b>Mean</b>	4	3,6

The results reported in this table indicates that the average means for both dimensions are high, which would make it difficult to make any judgments on the respondents' conceptions of teaching as being deep or surface.

**Table 3.17: Item means for conceptions of teaching as encouraging personal understanding**

b	Lecturers who encourage us to think for ourselves and show us how they themselves think.	4,1
c	Exams that allow me that I've thought about the course materials for myself.	3,8
f	Courses where we're encouraged to read around the subject a lot for ourselves.	3,8
g	Lecturers who challenge me and provide information which goes beyond the lectures.	4,3
a	Lecturers who tell us exactly what to put down in our notes.	3,13
d	Exams or tests that need only the materials provided in our lecture notes.	3,27
e	Courses in which it is made very clear exactly what information we need to learn during the term and what books provide us with such information.	4,01
f	Lecturers who give us definite facts and information which can easily be learned.	4

The findings reported in tables 20 and 21 indicate that the subjects scored higher on the items related to the deep conception of teaching. The highest scored were 4, 1,a and 4.3, which reflect the students' preferences for the challenging type of lecturers that encourage critical thinking. The other scores for the rest of the items in the same dimension are also significantly high. However, looking at table 21, which reports the findings related to the surface conception of teaching, we find similar results, despite the fact that the scores are slightly lower than those of the deep dimension. This means that



the students tended to score rather high in most items, which made it rather difficult for the researcher to interpret the data as reflecting deep or surface conception of teaching.

The above analysis of the questionnaire data indicated some homogeneity among the students overall learning approaches. In other words, the questionnaire results did not indicate any significant variation among the students in the beginning of the study. In addition, the descriptive statistics seemed and far from indicative of the populations' orientation towards one of the three approaches. In fact, the overall results obtained from the deep, surface and strategic dimensions do not clearly indicate the orientation of the students towards one specific dimension. There are a few instances where rater differences of ranking warranted a few comments, but that was not sufficiently significant to make firm conclusions about the students' orientation towards one dimension instead of another.

One reasonable explanation for the fact that the students scored high or low on all three dimensions would be that the students have been surveyed in a transitional stage in their university studies. In fact, it is typical of novice students in their early stages of their university studies not to show a clear orientation towards one approach. We have illustrated how the respondents scored for the three dimensions, deep, surface, and strategic consisted of high and low means on all three dimensions. The students may not have established yet a specific learning approach orientation.

Another possible explanation for these findings would be related to the questionnaire items themselves, which might not have adequately reflected the complexity of the approaches to learning of the subjects. Approaches to learning are acknowledged being individual and contextual and so the inventory may not accurately reflect the depth of the students' views. This might confirm that the best way to consider learning is through qualitative instruments which take into consideration every individual's views. This is

the objective of the next section which involves the analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the same population.

From the purely statistical point of view, in the case no clear orientation to the deep, surface, or strategic approaches is identified, the results should be subjected to a further statistical analysis called factorial analysis. The aim of factorial analysis of questionnaires data is to identify any further dimensions which the population might have reflected in the data. This could have been very interesting as the dimensions resulting from such factorial analysis would have been relevant to the context of the respondents. However, such analysis was possible to be carried out in the current study due to the fact that the factorial analysis implies the participation of at very large number of respondents (at least 200 respondents).

Having presented and analyzed the data collected in Sge1 of our study, we have now obtained an idea about the student's prior-experience of learning. In what follows is the presentation and analysis of the Sge2 data.

### **Conclusion:**

The data analyzed in this chapter was collected using three main instruments, a semi-structured interview, written accounts, and a questionnaire. The analysis of data presented in this chapter sought to identify the students' prior-experience of studying Linguistics. Thus, the qualitative analysis presented in this chapter came up with findings to understanding Linguistics from the students' perspectives using both written and verbal data. The results suggested that the majority of the students conceived studying Linguistics as an increase in knowledge historical and Linguistic. In terms of approaches to learning, the students appeared highly syllabus-bound and dependent on the teacher. The approaches reflected their concentration on the assessment requirements, a lack of interest in the subject and a huge concern about failing to pass the module. The dominant approaches of learning was reproducing-oriented than meaning-oriented.

The questionnaire findings came up with a different story; it was rather indefinite and did not reveal firm conclusions about the direction of the students towards deep, surface, or strategic approaches. The mean scores for deep conceptions of and approaches to learning tended to be high combined with standard deviation, the findings suggested that the students overall tended to be consistent in adopting the deep conceptions and approaches. The lower mean scores were obtained on the surface approach along with higher standard deviation showed that the students on average a lesser tendency towards surface learning. After the qualitative data analysis, it has become clear that the questionnaire items might not have been relevant for the context of the current study. In fact, the students' accounts clearly demonstrated that the questionnaire items for strategic and surface approaches did not sufficiently represent the complexity of the students' approaches in the beginning of their 2<sup>nd</sup> year experience.

These findings are preliminary and should be supplemented by the results from Sge2 to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the students' learning experience, which will be presented in Chapter Four.

**Chapter Four:**  
**Presentation and Analysis of**  
**Stage Two Findings**

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Presentation and Analysis of Stage Two Findings**

#### **Introduction:**

After the initial stage that provided the ground about the student's study experience at the beginning of the course of Linguistics, this chapter delves deeper into the way the students experience studying Linguistics in the classroom. It presents the analysis of the findings from stage two of the study which focuses on classroom experience of learning based on text-based linguistic lectures. Data collection in this stage derived from the students' summaries and stimulated-recall interviews resulting in complex written and verbal data, which resulted in complex data requiring an adaptation of the data analysis frameworks.

Hence, this chapter begins by exploring the method of data analysis that with the aim to discuss of the frameworks used to come out with the categories of description in this stage. The findings are then presented and analyzed following phenomenographic data analysis which focuses on forming the various categories of description along with the key features. The categories of description are sustained by evidence of well selected and representative quotes from the students' data. This chapter presents equally the outcome space summarizing the findings in a phenomenographic way

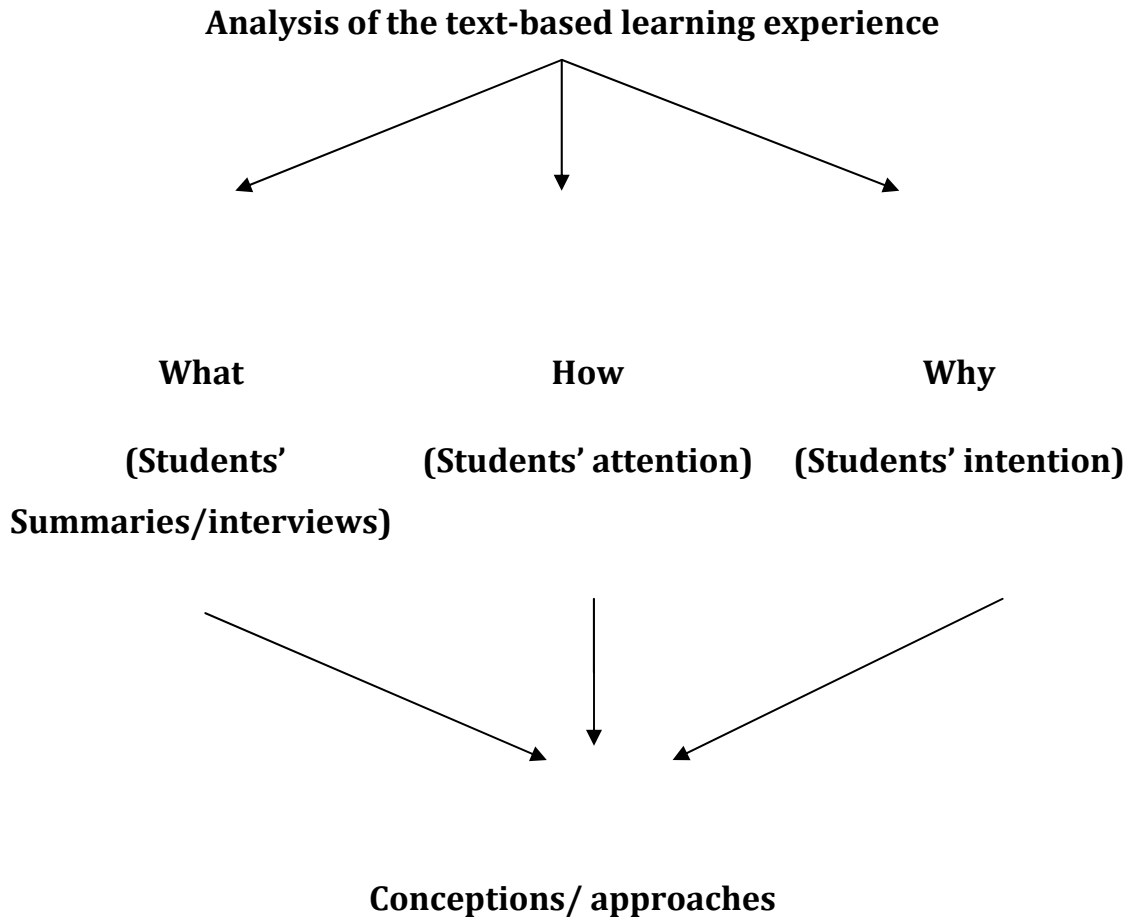
#### **4.1- Method of Data Analysis:**

The data analyzed in this section consisted of both verbal and written reports that derived from summaries and interviews. Both instruments were developed to reflect the normal study experiences, and so both written and verbal reports in this stage were considered as the direct **outcome** of that

learning situation (Marton, 1997; Trigwell, 1999). It was therefore inconvenient to follow exactly the same method in the analysis of the prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to the study of linguistics. Instead, another framework adapted from phenomenographic literature had to be worked to obtain the results that could best answer to the research questions. The end aim of data analysis remained the same: coming out with the qualitatively various categories of description well presented in an outcome space that accounts for the students' experience of learning.

The method for data analysis was largely based on the framework suggested by Marton (1997) for qualitative data analysis (figure3.2). According to this framework, the analysis of the learning outcomes (the summaries and the interviews) results in categories of description for both conceptions of and approaches to learning. Analyzing the learning outcomes in phenomenography, does not look for "how much is learned", i.e. the quantity of knowledge and information taken by the students, it emphasizes instead "what is learned", i.e. the qualitative learning outcomes.

**Figure 4.1: Framework for the Analysis of Classroom Study Data**



Marton's framework was adapted for this stage of data analysis because it takes into consideration two important aspects of learning: the first aspect has to do with conceptions of and approaches to learning while the second concerns learning outcomes. In other words, it aims at analyzing the learning outcomes in terms of conceptions, which are referred to in the original framework as *'the referential aspect'* of the learning experience, along with learning approaches also termed *'the structural aspect'* of the learning

experience (Marton, 1997; Biggs, 2005). For the sake of relevance to the previous section and in order to avoid ambiguity in reporting the findings, the terms conceptions and approaches are going to be used instead of '*referential*' and '*structural*' aspect of learning experience.

According to Marton (1997) these two aspects of the learning experience are "*two sides of the coin*" Commenting on this framework for data analysis, Lucas (2001: 166) concluded:

This framework distinguishes the act of experiencing from that which is experienced. Thus, learning comprises both a 'how' and a 'what' aspect representing the approach and its outcome (...). Consequently, how a student approaches a learning task is intimately related to what the student intends to do. Similarly, how an explanation is given is bound up with the explanation refers to.

The main reason why this frame work was adapted is to handle both the verbal and written data collected in Sge 2 in an effective way. The data was huge and as a beginner on phenomenography, we could lose track over the main themes. Using this framework, the process of data analysis was gradual going through analyzing the data in terms of 'what', 'how', and 'why' aspects, in order to extract findings that would tell us about the students' conceptions of, approaches to studying Linguistics based on the learning tasks along with the learning outcomes.

Given the context of this study, which is different from those who first initiated this framework for phenomenographic analysis, an adaptation was needed. Indeed, Marton (1988, 1997) argued that this method could be adapted to various disciplines and contexts. For example, it proved to be quite efficient in studies on the accounting students' learning conceptions and approaches (Lucas, 2001; Sharma, 1999). This flexibility made it possible to



adapt Marton's (1988, 1997) method of data analysis for this stage. The framework as adapted is illustrated in figure 3.

As illustrated in this figure, this study as well as its analysis is a reflection of the qualitative way of understanding what and how the students learn in a natural learning situation. In fact, *how* the students approach learning (students' approaches) is closely bound up with *what* they actually came out from that experience (learning outcomes) and what they intended to convey or achieve (students' intentions). As for the students' intentions, it was essential to involve them in the process of analysis because this theme emerged as pertinent right from the very first stages of the data analysis. Under each of these three aspects, variation among the students was identified. These initial aspects were then brought together and used to form the outcome space that would likely describe the students' learning experience in the linguistics lectures.

For a better exploration of the data, an inductive method was adopted, especially since one of the main objectives of this study was to discuss how the findings might explain the learning context of the present study. This means that the data analysis was carried out without having the objective to necessarily fit the data into categories of description already set in the literature. The research literature has shown that the categories of description that would identify the experience of learning in any learning situation are too context-driven (Lucas, 2001; Ramsden, 2003). The learning approaches might be an exception and can be broadly described in relation to the surface/deep dichotomy (Lucas, 2001). Nevertheless, as stated by Ramsden (2013), the researcher has to remain flexible and take into account the contextual factors in the phenomenographic analysis. This was the challenging aspect of the data analysis of this stage. Following these arguments, the data analysis was open to any context-specific or even unexpected categories to emerge as compared

to those already identified in the previous studies. As for the deep/surface dichotomy for the learning approaches is taken as a frame of reference but not as categories of description.

In addition, the analyses of the summaries and the interviews focused on looking at the extent to which the students' learning experience was meaningful. **'Meaningful learning'** in phenomenographic studies is judged by the proximity of the students' understanding to the author's and/or the teacher's intentions which are the message intended to be communicated to the students. The data were then analyzed taking into consideration this crucial principle (Entwistle et al, 1997; Marton, 1994). In relation to this, Entwistle et al (1997: 56) argued that "*To learn is to strive for meaning*", which implies that analyzing the outcome of learning, was to dig into the way the students attempted to search for the meaning of the learning material.

#### **4.2- Presentation and Analysis of the Study Conceptions of and Approaches to Studying Linguistics based on the Text-Based Learning Experience:**

This section is devoted to the analysis of the students' conceptions and approaches to the study of Linguistics based on text-based lectures. Data in Sge2 derived from the students' summaries, which were collected in two different lectures, and the students' stimulated-recall interviews collected after each of the two lectures.

The aim was to capture the students' experience of learning in natural situations without any intervention on the part of the researcher. Having this objective in mind, the students were not invited to participate in the after-lectures interviews more than once; the students would become aware that the classroom tasks were designed for research and not for learning purposes, and this would have affected the findings. Thus, the classroom study was

carefully conducted in a way that does not affect the students' thoughts and reflections in advance.

Related to this was the issue of the students' participation in the classroom study. An important criteria was taken into consideration in the selection of these subjects was that all the students selected had necessarily participated in the first stage of the study. This is important for the final discussion of the results. For this reason, and as will be observed, some of the students who initially took part in the first stage of the study were absent during the classroom study. For a better description of the data collected, the table below provides details about the type of data collected from each of the subjects. The codes given for the students in this stage were the same as those used in Sge1.

**Table 4.1: The Students' Participation in the Classroom Study by Subject**

<b>Stu.codes</b>	Passage1	Passage 2	<b>Stu.codes</b>	Passaeg1	Passage 2
<b>1</b>	√	√	<b>21</b>	√	√
<b>2</b>	√	√	<b>22</b>	√	√
<b>3</b>	√	√	<b>23</b>	√	√
<b>4</b>	√	√	<b>24</b>	√	√
<b>5</b>	√	√	<b>25</b>	√	√
<b>6</b>	√	√	<b>26</b>	√	<b>absent</b>
<b>7</b>	√	√	<b>27</b>	√	√
<b>8</b>	√	√	<b>28</b>	√	√
<b>9</b>	<b>absent</b>	√	<b>29</b>	√	√
<b>10</b>	√	√	<b>30</b>	√	√
<b>11</b>	√	<b>absent</b>	<b>31</b>	√	√
<b>12</b>	√	√	<b>32</b>	√	√
<b>13</b>	√	√	<b>33</b>	√	√
<b>14</b>	√	√	<b>34</b>	√	<b>absent</b>
<b>15</b>	√	√	<b>35</b>	√	√

<b>16</b>	√	<b>absent</b>	<b>36</b>	√	√
<b>17</b>	√	√	<b>37</b>	<b>absent</b>	√
<b>18</b>	√	√	<b>38</b>	√	√
<b>19</b>	√	√	<b>39</b>	√	√
<b>20</b>	√	<b>absent</b>	<b>40</b>	√	√

As illustrated in the above table, the number of students selected in the first stage was 40. However, because these subjects were not informed in advance that they had to be present; their presence was not supposed to be guided. Otherwise, the data deriving from the classroom study would have been affected by the authority of the researcher, who in the case of the present study was also the teacher. As a consequence, the number of the participants in the classroom study was affected. Some of the students attended only one lecture and missed the other. The participation of these students in Sge2 could be summarized as follows:

**Table 4.2: Overview of the Subjects Participation in Stage 2**

Type of data	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Summary 1</b>	<b>Summary 2</b>
number of participants	40	38	36

The number of the participants remained 40 because none of the selected students missed both lectures; attending one lecture was enough to validate the participation of the student in the classroom study. Obviously, these students were interviewed in relation to the lecture they attended. It follows from this that all the data obtained consisted:

- of interviews with 40 students
- 38 summaries collected in lecture 1 (students 9 and 37 were absent), and

- 36 summaries from lecture 2 (students 11, 20, 26, and 34 were absent).

It should be recognized while the framework was quite relevant for guiding the general analysis, especially for the interviews data, a method of analyzing the summaries had to be worked out in way that would lead to the identification of the students' categories of description. In fact, the analysis of the summaries the focus was on the summarizing operations that the students typically applied in order to arrive at their summaries. By operations it is meant the different summarizing techniques that the students used to reconstruct the original text into a summary (van Dick and Kitch, 1989). The summarizing operations identified in the literature are:

- *Thesis statement*
- *meta-statements*
- *Selection*
- *Deletion*
- *Inferences*

A summary is defined as a reduction of the original, but not a mere reproduction; the quality of the summary and the summarizer's personal effort can be shown through the effective usage of the summarizing operations mentioned above (Van Dijk and Kitch, 1989). Every summary was checked against the original text in order to identify what was ***selected, deleted, inferred or re-constructed***. The summaries were also analyzed for the students' use of '***meta-statements***', and their own words as opposed to the use of the words of the original text. It should be emphasized that the objective remains phenomenographic and not discourse analysis. Thus, any summarizing operations used by the students would tell us about the quality of the summaries produced, resulting in categories of description. The aim is

to obtain data that would eventually give us information about the extent to which their experience was meaningful.

The analysis of the summaries according to the operations employed by the students with the objective of forming categories of description was quite challenging; yet necessary to come out with the outcome space for the students' experience of learning. According to Marton (1997), the students' selection and deletion of information is underpinned by personal objectives or intentions, their perceptions of how the task should be approached; their beliefs about their role in the process of learning and their general perception of the context of learning.

#### **4.2.1- Students' Text-Based Experience of Studying Linguistics: Analysis of the Summaries and Interviews**

The analysis of data showed that the students' responses fell under three categories for each of the three aspects: what, how, and why. As clarified in the method of data analysis, before presenting the variation emerging from the data in relation to what, how and why aspects, it is crucial to go through the analysis of the quality of the summaries. The emphasis is laid on the summarizing operations that contributed to the formation of the various categories of descriptions.

The analysis of the summaries indicated that a few students managed to produce summaries which could be described as satisfactory. Satisfactory summaries would be those that showed the students' ability dig into the message of the author, instead of the surface information (Marton and Saljo, 1993). This could be reflected in his/her ability to provide a thesis statement, make inferences about the information, and elaborate on what is mentioned in the text, all of which are effective summarizing operations.

The introductory statements used in summaries play a crucial role in reflecting the understanding of the passage being summarized (Mey, 1989; Van Dijk, 1983). Thus, in analyzing the summaries, the focus was on various ways the students structured the content of their summaries. More specifically the emphasis was laid on the way, extent, and manner in which the students established the purpose of their summaries. This is commonly known as *'the statement of purpose'* or the *'thesis statement'* usually announced in the beginning of the summary/piece of writing, which signals to the reader the 'purpose' of the summary.

For Van Dick (1983) the purpose statement could be a signal of the weakness or strength of the piece of writing. One way of stating the purpose of a summary is to refer to the text or the author. For example: "this passage/the author is about....", "the passage/ the author discussed....", "this extract/ the author tackled.....". The purpose statement then seems crucial in the summary as it is expected to reflect the subjects' understanding of the original text. Since the summary is supposed to be an account of the main ideas of the text, the summaries statement of purpose is commonly acknowledged as an indication of good quality writing. When a student starts his/her summary with what the passage was mainly about, he/she is said to have reflected on the main idea of the text. In other words, the purpose statement engages him/her in looking for the meaning behind the information summarized. Therefore, it was crucial for this study to analyze the extent and manner in which the students gave a purpose for their summaries. The results would tell us about the extent to which the students engaged in searching for meaning and purpose of the text they were reading, or a re-statement of the information mentioned in the text in a mechanical manner.

In this section, the focus will be on the extent to which the students provided thesis statements (also referred to as introductory statements) for their summaries. More comments about the students' use of other

summarizing operations will be done when reporting the variation in the students' learning outcomes. The reason why the students' use of the thesis statement is emphasized in a separate section is that the absence of the thesis statement was quite prominent in the students' summaries. A careful reading of the summaries indicated that the most striking finding was that only few students managed to provide introductory statements for their summaries. The absence of a thesis statement was observed to have affected the quality of the summaries in terms of both structure and content. As will be seen, the summaries which did not include a thesis statement were also missing statements that could reflect the students' personal elaboration and inferences. This finding is going to be discussed deeper when reporting the student's various learning outcomes in the next sub-sections.

Concerning the summaries analysis of this study, the first step was to look at whether or not the students provided any introductory statements for their summaries, and then try to obtain data that might explain the students' intentions and attention. The data obtained suggest that most of the subjects did not provide a general statement of purpose for their summaries. This is true for both passages, as illustrated in the table below.

**Table 4.3: Number of the Summaries and Percentages Providing Purpose Statement**

	Total number of the summaries	Purpose statement		No purpose statement	
		Num. stud	Perc.	Num. stud	Perc.
<b>Passage 1</b>	38	8	21,05%	30	52,63%
<b>Passage 2</b>	36	10	27,77%	26	75%



Only 8 students out of 38 student who submitted the summaries in lecture 1, and 10 out of 36 in lecture 2 gave a purpose statement or their summaries. All of the students that provided a thesis statement for their summaries of passage 1 managed also to do so for the second summary, too. These were (students 1, 2, 3, 6, 19, 29, and 30). For further analysis, the summaries were sorted out into those which contained a purpose statement and those which did not, and then tried to look through interviews data the statements that light clarify any emerging variety in the students' focus of attention and intentions which they underlie.

The table below provided a more detailed view about the summaries purpose statements provided by each student. This will help us to understand the findings that will be presented later in this section.

As can be seen in the above table, all of the students who provided a thesis statement for passage one, also managed to do so for passage 2. This seems to have reflected these subjects' approaches to the learning materials in the classroom; in other words it was not incidental for these students to provide a thesis statement. However, one can notice in the table above, 3 more students in lecture 2, managed to provide a thesis statement for their summaries of passage 2 of the study. These were (students, 4, 7, and 18). These 3 students did not provide any introductory statements for their summaries of passage 1.

**Table 4.4 : The Summaries' Purpose Statements for both Texts by Students**

<b>Stu.codes</b>	<b>Passage 1</b>	<b>Passage 2</b>	<b>Stu.codes</b>	<b>Passage 1</b>	<b>Passage 2</b>
<b>1</b>	√	√	<b>21</b>	X	<b>X</b>
<b>2</b>	√	√	<b>22</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>3</b>	√	√	<b>23</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>X</b>	√	<b>24</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>6</b>	√	√	<b>26</b>	<b>X</b>	no summary
<b>7</b>	<b>X</b>	√	<b>27</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>8</b>	√	√	<b>28</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>9</b>	No summary	√	<b>29</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>30</b>	√	√
<b>11</b>	√	no summary	<b>31</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>X</b>	no summary
<b>16</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>37</b>	no summary	<b>X</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>19</b>	√	√	<b>39</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>X</b>	no summary	<b>40</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

During interviews, I sought clarification for the reasons why they had neglected the statement purpose in their summaries of passage 1 and not in passage 2. S4 reported not having had enough time in lecture 1 to write the thesis statement:

I didn't have time, so I just took the important ideas from the passage and write my summary (S4)

It should be noted that the time allotted for the activity of reading and summarizing was exactly the same in the two occasions, which seems to suggest that this student had an issue with managing her time during the activity in the first occasion than in the second.

As for students 7 and 18, they explicitly reported having thought that mentioning Chomsky as the author of the passage 2 they were summarizing was quite relevant, which was not the case with passage 1. They both referred to the fact that the author of passage 2, Chomsky, not only attracted their attention, but would have helped them to understand initially what the text was generally about. This indicated the fact that the students used the source of the passage as a signal that would help them to understand the direction of text, as reported by student 18:

*“Before I started to summarize, I started to look at key words, difficult words, and everything that can help me to understand the text, even the writer, I mean the source”.* (Student 18, passage 2)

Student 7 reported having been aware of the importance of Chomsky in the course of linguistics, and so she was expecting the text to be about his ideas/theory:

S7: I read the text, and I saw the author that it was Chomsky, and I started to read the text and think about the ideas that we can learn about Chomsky, what he wants to tell us and so on”.

Inter: how about passage 1, you didn't mention the author, you didn't introduce the summary? Can you explain why?

S7: No in passage 1, I didn't, it was not important, I just wrote about the main ideas, but in passage 2, it was Chomsky, and in the lectures, you talked about Chomsky as an important linguist.

The summaries which did not include thesis statements were introduced simply by taking the introductory sentences of the original texts, either copied directly or paraphrased. This finding was quite striking that it cannot be overlooked. This seems to have affected the quality of the final outcome, and created some variation in the students' summaries, which are to be further analyzed in the next section.

#### **4.2.1.1- Variation in the Quality of the Summaries: Analysis of the Summaries**

The initial analysis of the operations that the students performed to arrive at their summaries, three different ways of summarizing the texts were depicted:

- i) **Category A:** Reconstructing the text
- ii) **Category B:** Reconstructing the message of the text
- iii) **Category C:** Relating the information of the text to the course of linguistics in general.

##### **i) Category A: Reconstructing the Text:**

- **Description of the Category:**

In this category, the students' summaries were simply shorter versions and not summaries. The summaries looked more like copied than personally summarized version of the original texts (Van Dijk, 1983). The most striking feature of these students was over-reliance on the author's original words and even order of ideas; instead of structuring the text's ideas according to their importance in the text, the students in this category merely rewrote them in the way they appeared in the original texts.

In addition, the students did not manage to use of the macro-processes successfully, such as the use of meta-statements, inference, and selection, reflecting the students' reduction of the summaries to the act of 'copying

down' a few sentences from the passage. Indeed, the main concern of the students depicted in this category was to rewrite the text in order to make it shorter than the original text. The following are typical illustrations of the summary produced by students 4 and 22 in lecture 1 and lecture 2 respectively:

S 4 summarized passage 1 as follows:

It has been known that children learn to speak by copying the utterances heard around them, then reinforce them with repetition; this process is known as imitation and reinforcement, but it has been shown that this process still doesn't not explain why do children show inability in irregular grammatical forms (1). For example, when children come across irregular past tenses forms they assume that grammatical usage is regular and tend to say such words as wanted, which means that they did not learn this by imitation (2). Moreover, they seem unable to imitate the correct form been when invited to by adults and the best proof for it is the dialogue reported by the psychologist David Mc Neil, when a child proved unable to repeat what the parents presented as a correct form. In brief, such examples show the fact *that language acquisition is more a matter of maturation than of imitation.*(3)

- (1) No thesis statement.
- (2) Deletion.
- (3) Follows the same order of ideas as the original text.

S 22 summary of passage 2 is reported below:

The most obvious characteristic of verbal linguistic behavior is that it is stimulus-free and innovative (1). This property of being innovative and stimulus-free is what I refer to by the term "creative aspect of language use", it is one cornerstone for classical linguistic theory (2).

Any theory of language must come to grips with this fundamental property of normal language use; and to deal with this problem the native speaker of a language has internalized a generative grammar in

- (1) No thesis statement
- (2) Copied from the original text.
- (3) Deletion.

the sense just described, but he has no awareness of properties of this grammar.

Generative grammar is a theory of a speaker's intrinsic linguistic competence that serves as a component of a theory that can accommodate the creative aspect of language use (3).

(4) Follows the order of ideas as the original text.

As can be observed from these two examples, that the texts do not look any different from the texts presented in the classroom, except in the number of words; definitely, the summaries look shorter. According to Van Dick (1983), these can be considered the weakest summary a learner can produce. The summaries depicted in this category also reflected the students' tendency to look at the text as separate paragraphs and did not manage to understand the text as a whole.

- **Summarizing Operations:**

The summaries in this category were characterized by the following features:

- No thesis statements were included (1).
- Reflecting the use of one summarizing operation, which is deletion (2).
- No selection was involved (3).
- Rewritten following the same order of the ideas as in the summarized text (4).

The first feature characterizing the summaries in category was the absence of thesis statements. The students in this category copied the first sentence of the original passage either literally or slightly changed. Here are a few typical examples:

Language acquisition has been thought to be a process of imitation and reinforcement **(S8, passage 1)**

Language has always been thought a process of imitation and reinforcement.(S 20, passage 1)

There is a process of imitation and reinforcement of children language acquisition. (S25, passage 1)

The most obvious characteristics of verbal linguistic behavior is that it is stimulus-free and innovative.(S 22, passage 2)

Verbal linguistic behavior consists of two main characteristics: stimulus free and innovative.(S29, passage 2)

'Stimulus' and 'response' are the two terms that characterize verbal behavior.(S 40, passage 2)

As can be observed from these extracts, the introductory statements are close to the authors' original introductory sentences, in most cases, they were literally copied. It is interesting to note that the students, who did not manage to provide thesis statement for their summaries of passage 1, also had the same tendency when summarizing passage 2. This may mean that it was not incidental to for these students not to come out with personally produced summaries that would reflect their understanding.

Indeed, the students in this category relied on one main operation through the process of summarizing, which is **deletion**. In fact, they seemed to be concerned with deleting the information they believed to be unnecessary or redundant, suggesting that the students did not use any relevant selection of what they believe to be contributing to the main idea in summarizing the texts. S4 and 22 expressed this when they were asked to comment on the summarizing strategies they used in the summarizing task:

**S4:** I took the main idea of the text, omitted (2) all the details, and I wrote only the main ideas. (3)

**Inter:** Did you try to reflect over the main ideas you picked up from the text?

**S4:** Yes, I tried to understand the main ideas.

**Inter:** Great. Did you write about what you understood?

**S4:** No, I don't need to write my ideas, I had to write the ideas in the text (3).

A similar tendency was observed in the account of S22:

**S22:** I started to write the summary, first I omitted the details, such as the examples, and I concentrated on the main ideas.

However, the use of this summarizing operation was rather random. The students tended to copy the entire text deleting only a few randomly selected sentences. It is as if the students felt everything was important and needed to be mentioned in their summaries. The summaries of the students mentioned, did not look any different from the original text. In fact, the students omitted some information for the sake of shortening the summary, which was not really based on any personal reflection.

In the interviews, these students were noticed that they used the words 'omitted' to refer to deletion, and phrases such as, 'I took', 'I wrote', 'I concentrated on', 'I focused on' to express selection. Does this suggest that the students used 'selection'?

Unlike deletion, selection is identified in the literature as a macro-operation that reflects higher order summarizing techniques. It would be misleading to call the students' tendency to choose some pieces of information and omitting others as 'selection'. This is so because selection implies high order level as it involves the students' personal reflection over the relevance of the text information. Such personal effort was not observed in the students' process of summarizing in this category. In other words, they were ambiguous as to the information they had to select. Although some students mentioned the fact that they selected what they referred to "*the most important*" or "*necessary*" information, they appeared not to be sure of what was necessary



or important. The used operation in this case seems to be deletion rather than selection.

The following extracts with S8 are typical illustrations of this:

**Inter:** Do you think this is how a summary should be written?

**S8:** Of course, this is a summary: I have to omit details~~all the details~~(2).

**Inter:** What do you mean by details?

**S8:** Examples, dates, and all the explanations.

**Inter:** So, what information did you select in your summary?

**S8:** After I omitted the details, all the other information is important (3).

S8 in this extract, was aware of the details to be omitted but seemed unsure as what should be selected as can be seen from the underline parts above. The following extract from the interview with S13 also illustrates the way he was more concerned with shortening the passage than with selecting the most relevant information which would reflect his understanding:

**S13:** I was concentrating on the main ideas; I took only the important information(2) and omitted the details (3)which I don't need them. I don't need to write everything (3)

**Inter:** Okay, what information did you select?

**S13:** I omitted all the details(3) of the text first, I took only the necessary information(2) then I wrote the summary because it shouldn't be long (3).

**Inter:** What was this necessary information?

**S13:** Yes, the main ideas, I couldn't take everything, it would be too long (3).

Looking beyond the thesis statements of the summaries, to analyze the content of summaries produced by these students, one might observe the same tendency to rely exclusively on the original texts' contents and structures. For example, the students wrote the summaries following the

same order of the ideas as they appeared in the original texts. This means that the students did not manage to use one of the most useful macro-operations in summarizing which is **inference**, and this led the students to rely on the author's sequence of ideas, while the students could have inferred the main message of the text and sort out the important and peripheral ideas.

In addition, as shown in the above illustrations, the summaries in this category did not contain paraphrased sentences or a change in the order of the ideas. The students typically copied down whole sentences, chunks from the original texts. In most cases, the examples mentioned in the original text were literally mentioned in the summaries of these students.

In addition, the students' overreliance on the original texts was reflected in the absence of elaboration. Instead, they simply rewrote the same information as shown in the above illustrations. In an attempt to search for the reasons that affected the students' reliance on the text instead of personal reflection, data were analyzed with this objective in view. It was found out that these students did not manage to recognize that the texts contained only one main idea; rather, the majority of the subjects identified in this category reported that the texts contained three main ideas, while few other students reported having thought there were two ideas.

It should be reminded that the texts each contained 3 paragraphs but only one main idea. These students reported that the text contained 3 main ideas based on the number of the paragraphs in the text. According to these students, there were three paragraphs, they were required them to identify the main ideas of each of the three paragraph in the text; they presupposed that the text must have contained three main ideas. The accounts of students S33, and S23 are very explicit:

At First I thought there were two main ideas, but when I saw the paragraphs, I changed my mind, it was clear that the text had three but not two ideas (S33, passage 1)

I was looking at each paragraph and started to find the main idea of each one. There were three main ideas in the text. (student 23, passage 2)

These illustrations showed how the students were too dependent on the material in building their understanding of the text. For example, S33 reported that the text had three main ideas based on the tasks and not on her own reflection over the context of the text, while S23 did not seem to have done the effort to come up with her own understanding of the main ideas of the text. Both students ended up converting the responses to the task questions into summaries. This over-reliance not only on the content of the text but also the learning materials might also have affected the way their summaries were structured. Therefore, the students did not make any changes to the order of the text information. In fact, as we will see in the rest of the data analysis, the tendency to rely on the task questions in the process of summarizing depended on whether the students' main intention was to complete the tasks or to reflect over its content. More details about the students' intentions are provided later in this chapter.

As a consequence, the summaries of the students in this category cannot be qualified as good versions of the original passages because the summaries were written with little effort, reflection and less effective summarizing operations. This outcome might be justified when the language or content of the texts are above their level of proficiency. However, the students in this category did not report having found the texts especially difficult. When asked about their general impression of the texts, they all commented on the texts as being 'very simple', 'very easy', 'not difficult', and 'clear', in relation to passage 1. As for passage 2, some students found it difficult in the beginning as it contained some new terminology, but at the same time they reported having understood it after several readings.

In sum, in this category the process of summarizing can be described as static (Lucas, 2001), reflecting very little personal and autonomous approach to writing a summary. For these students, summarizing is simplified to the process of deleting some information and keeping other to be reconstructed or rather 'rewritten', in a way that is as close as possible to the original text. This category involves very little thinking over the message behind the information summarized. The students identified in this category were did not succeed to come up with summaries that could be satisfactory.

### **ii) Category B: Reconstructing the Message of the Text**

- **Description of the Category:**

The students in this category (S6, S8, S25, S27, and S36) appeared to be actively engaged in the activity of understanding and reconstructing the message of the text. They seemed concerned with not only producing shorter versions of the original texts but also with the expression of their understanding of their contents. In the interviews, they expressed their concern about looking for the meaning behind the information, as will be seen in the selected extracts later in this section. In terms of summarizing operations, the students made use of a number of effective macro-operations which resulted in better summaries as compared to those depicted in the previous category. The summaries in this category typically showed the students' tendency to start with the main idea of the passage, reflecting therefore their concern with understanding the message of the author. In addition, the students appeared to be interested in understanding the text as whole and not as separate paragraphs.

- **Summarizing Operations:**

The summaries in category reflected the students' tendency to:

- Provide thesis statements and meta-statements.
- To use selection and inferences as the main summarizing operations.
- Reconstructing the text in a way that reflected their understanding.
- Relating the main ideas of the text to extract the meaning that the author wanted to convey.

The students in this category managed to start their summaries with a purpose statement (1). They were typically provided as follows for passage 1:

The passage is about language acquisition. (S27)

The text is about the way children acquire language (S8)

In this passage, the author explains how children acquire their language (S25)

These thesis statements helped the students to start their summaries with the general theme of passage 1, which is "language acquisition". As for passage 2, the students typically mentioned the author, Noam Chomsky, in their thesis statements along with the theme of the text (2). They also included **inferences** about the information of the text (3), as illustrated in these selected examples:

The text is taken from the book of Noam Chomsky(2) entitled 'linguistic theory'. This excerpt discusses Chomsky's theory of language acquisition as being counter Behaviourist theory(3) (S7, passage 2)

In this example, S7 made use of a number of meta-statements such as '*the text is taken from...*', '*the book of Noam Chomsky...*', '*this expert discusses...*'. In addition, the student inferred the name of the theories referred

to by the author and did not hesitate to mention them in the beginning of the summary, despite the fact that it was not explicitly mentioned in the text.

One of the main elements that made the summaries in this category better than those of category A was the ability of the students to perceive the difference between the main idea of the text and the arguments. This was observed in the way the students in category B structured their summaries; the students chose to write their summaries focusing on the main ideas, and not necessarily following the order in which they appear in the original text. Technically speaking, the operations used were inference and selection. This latter reflects the students' ability to assess the importance of the information before summarizing (4). The students also tended to paraphrase (5) instead of copying down sentences directly from the text, as illustrated in the following extract.

The passage was written by Chomsky, who is a mentalist(4, inference about the linguistics school). Language for him is not based on stimulus-response, but it is stimulus-free and creative (4, 5).

**(S6, passage 2)**

In this extract, S6 opened her summary with the main idea of the text, which was selected from paragraph 3, reflecting her personal understanding when she **selected** what she thought was relevant for her summary.

The following extract from an interview with S7 also shows how the student extracted the main idea of the text first and in this process she was not necessarily following the order of the ideas as they appeared in the text:

**S7:** I read the text, and tried to understand the main idea(a)I wrote it (b). It was about the theory of Chomsky and the theory of stimulus-bound of Skinner(c).

**Inter:** Ok, how did you write this idea?

- (a) Focus on meaning.
- (b) Selection of the important ideas.
- (c) Inferences about the linguistic theories and paraphrasing.
- (d) Selecting the main

S7: Yes, I wrote it on my draft first, and in my summary, yes, I started with this idea (d). And after this, I was reading each paragraph to understand the main ideas of each paragraph(e).

*idea to start with.*  
(e) *Focus on extracting the meaning the author wants to convey.*

In addition, the students in this category relied more on their personal understanding in writing their summaries instead of copying down the text information in the author's order and manner.

A further characteristic of the students in this category managed to reconstruct the message of the text by seeking an understanding of the global message of the text instead of separate paragraphs or terms. In doing so, they managed to relate ideas expressed by each paragraph to each other, as already observed in the interviews extracts above with S7. The following is another illustration taken from the interview with S25

S25: I was looking for the main idea of the text(a). I read each the paragraphs many times and I wrote the main idea of each one, the text was complicated a bit, but when I put down the main idea of each paragraph(b), I understood it was about the 'creative aspect of language acquisition' (c). Yeah, in the beginning, I said there were many ideas like two ideas(d), not like the first text, but when I read all the main ideas of each paragraph I could understand that they were all about this topic (e).

a) Focus on meaning.  
b) Selecting the main ideas.  
c) Inference about the topic of the text.  
d) Relating ideas of various paragraphs

Relating the ideas of the text to each other was a common feature among the students in this category. This was an interesting finding that is going to be further elaborated in categories of description for the students' intentions and attention.

In sum, in this category, summarizing meant seeking understanding of the main message of the text instead of simply shortening the text into a

summary. The students therefore showed a more personal and active way to summarize the texts, mainly when they concerned themselves with relating the texts' main ideas to each other.

### **iii) Category C: Reconstructing the Message of the Text in Relation to the Course of Linguistics**

- **Description of the Category:**

The students depicted in this category (S1, S2, S14, S19, S29, S30) managed to reconstruct the message of the text not only through relating the various pieces of information of the text to each other, but also relating ideas of the text to what they had already learnt in the course of linguistics. The students focused on the meaning of the text mainly through inferring and selecting the most relevant information not only from the text being summarized but also the previous knowledge about the topic of the text being summarized. This interview extract with S2 illustrates this category:

**S2:** At first I thought it had many main ideas, but when I related the main ideas of the paragraphs(a), I understood that the text was about one idea (b).

**Inter:** What was it?

**S2:** That language was innovative and stimulus-free (c). The author said it in the last paragraph (d), that it was the creative aspect of language; I mean his theory was about the creative aspect of language.

**Inter:** What else did you understand from the text?

**S2:** I tried to understand the new terms of the text; I used the dictionary and asked my friend about them, and the lecture last week helped me to understand this text (e).

**Inter:** How?

**S2:** Well, this text is like, how to say, "la suite" of last lecture (f), you know, Chomsky always criticized Bloomfield and Skinner, and so I was looking for the relationship between what Chomsky said last week, I mean in the text before, and the text we had it today (g).

**Inter:** How did this help you?

- a) Relating the text ideas.
- b) Focus on meaning.
- c) Inference.
- d) Selection.
- e) Relating various lectures.
- f/g) Relating various lectures to obtain a global understanding



**S2:** It helps, of course, I know that the lectures are related and so I cannot understand one lecture before understanding the one before.

Relating information present in the text to that present in their background knowledge was identified by Marton (1994, 1997) as one of the main features of a deep approach to learning.

- **Summarizing Operations:**

A number of effective summarizing operations were observed in the summaries of this category, these were:

- Thesis statement mentioned (1).
- Meta-statement(s) successfully used. (2)
- Selections of adequate information (3).
- Inferences based on the students' understanding (4).

While these macro-operations were also applied by category B students in writing their summaries, the way these operations were used made the summaries produced in this category distinct from those of Category B. As will be seen in the illustrations below, the students used more meta-statements and inference, and successfully selected the information that would effectively summarize the original text. For example, S1 did not confine her thesis statement to the topic of the passage, which is 'language development', but went further to mention was more precisely about the limitations of the stimulus-response theory, which was inferred from her reading. This is also an example of selecting the most relevant information that would explain her understanding and not rewriting the text in a shorter version because the theme 'language development' was a piece of information mentioned in the second paragraph, but this student chose to start with this

idea. Thus, the following thesis statement is an illustration of four summarizing techniques used effectively by this student:

The passage is about language development. It shows the limitations of the stimulus-response theory(1). (S1, passage 2)

The students in this category deliberately put the information of the text in the context of the knowledge received during the previously taught lectures. This summarizing technique involved the students in constructing elements which were not explicitly mentioned in the text, yet intended by the author, and this was considered as an inference (4). The inferences made by the students in this category were based on the previous knowledge about the topic of the passage. In fact, inference in this category involved not only active reflection over the message of the text, but also building over the knowledge they had when reading the text. This was observed in the students' tendency to relate information present in the text to that which each of the students had when tackling the task. For example, the students explicitly named the theories hinted at in the text but were not explicitly mentioned. In the following examples, we can observe how S29 identified Chomsky as a mentalist, a piece of information mentioned in the previous lecture and not directly mentioned in the text. In spite of this, the student recognized this information as crucial enough to start her summary:

This passage was written by Chomsky, who is a mentalist (4). Language for him is not based on stimulus-response, but it is stimulus free and creative (3). (S29, passage 2)

A similar example was found in the summary of S19 for the same passage:

The text is about what constitutes language (4), is it based on stimulus-response or is it stimulus-free? Chomsky, who rejected the stimulus-response theory (4), discusses the creative aspect of language acquisition. (S19, passage 2)

In these extracts, the students decided to open their summaries with the main idea selected from paragraph 3 of the original text. This selection was not random but based on the students' understanding of the message of the text and relating. They not only related the text's ideas to each other to extract its meaning (5) but also various lectures to achieve a global understanding of main ideas of the texts (6). This latter can be observed when S29 and S19 respectively mentioned that Chomsky was a mentalist, and that he rejected the stimulus-response theory, both of which were ideas not explicitly mentioned in the original text. The following is S29 account of her experience of summarizing the text:

**S29:** [...] I had to find the relationship between the paragraphs in order to understand(5). But when I read it more carefully, like I scanned the text, I understood what it was about. Another thing that helped me was the lecture last week(6). I understood very well what the theory of Chomsky was about and all what you explained, and so I could understand this text.

When trying to dig deeper into the experience of S29, interesting data came out; the students seemed to have been constantly asking questions about and reflecting over the content of the course (7), leading her to relate the various pieces of information within the course of Linguistics in general (8). Here is how she expressed her understanding of the lectures:

**Inter:** How did the last lecture help you understand today's text?

**S29:** Not just the last lecture, it was about how Chomsky rejected Behaviourism, yes I mean the programme in general is about the linguistics theories, and how each theory is different and how it destroyed the first school(7). So, when we had the lecture about Bloomfield and also Skinner (8), I thought the theory of stimulus-response was the best one (7). But after that when we read about Chomsky, now I think Chomsky is right (7), he was right to criticize them. So, I think every theory is right and wrong at the same time, yes, this is what I want to say.

Besides, compared to the thesis statements produced by Category B students, one can observe that these students did not simply mention the name of the author or/ and the theory, but also tried to explain what they believed the text was mainly about. Here are illustrations of the students' effective use of inference, and selecting relevant information from the text, both which are higher order operations:

The text is about the way Chomsky's theory of language acquisition differs from the theory of Bloomfield and Skinner.(S1, passage 1)

The passage deals with the creative aspect of language for the theory of Chomsky. Chomsky is opposing the stimulus-response theory and explains that language is stimulus-free and creative.(S30, passage 2)

When interviewed in relation to her experience of summarizing passage 2, S30 interestingly accounted for her experience which reflects her understanding not only of the text, but also the lectures:

**S30:** So I think there was only main idea, and the others were supporting ideas (a). The main idea was that language is not stimulus-response, so and then Chomsky emphasized this idea by adding generative grammar, saying that a native speaker had this grammar and is not aware of it. And so the native speaker has a linguistic competence, and of course this competence cannot be the result of stimuli, and I understood this idea better after you explained it**(b)**. But when I summarized it I paraphrased, I didn't mention exactly what was in the text, and I omitted some unnecessary details (c).

**Inter:** What were these details?

**S30:** I omitted the last phrase of the first paragraphs and I cannot remember exactly what I omitted. I first of all established the main idea of each paragraph and then I paraphrased this idea using examples from the text, and I omitted all the rest (d).

**Inter:** But you told me there was only one main idea[...]

**S30:** Yes, but in the other paragraphs, we had the main arguments I guess.

**Inter:** What were they?

- a) Looking for meaning.
- b) The teacher is not the main and only source of knowledge.
- c) Complex summarizing operations.
- d) Producing a summary that reflects her understanding
- e) Selecting the most relevant information based on her

**S30:**Generative grammar was the main idea, like I mentioned in the topic sentence and then the awareness of the native speaker was an argument for generative grammar, so they were related to each other. I could not find how they were separated from each other, the paragraphs(e).

understanding.

As a summary for this category, we can say that the students' ability to reconstruct the message of the text and relating the text's information to the knowledge studied during the course of linguistics made the summaries distinct from the other categories of description. This variation is further observed when analyzing the data to depict any variation in the students' focus of attention. This will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.2.1.2- Variation in the Students' Attention: Categories of Description**

The previously discussed results suggest that the students came out with different summaries while reconstructing the same texts in the same learning situations. Digging deeper into the data, it was found out that the students arrived at different understanding because they were looking for different things while tackling the task. Therefore, the next purpose was to identify various pieces of information or details that the students emphasized when reading and summarizing the passages. Summaries and interviews data were reconsidered with this purpose in view, taking notes of any comments that would be indicative of their focus of attention and intention (to be analyzed later in this chapter) during the task completion.

The aim of this section therefore is to explain any possible relationship between the quality of the **learning outcomes** and the **learning process**. These data were essentially drawn from the participants' interviews, but also

from the summaries they produced. Thus the findings discussed in the previous section are going to be helpful in clarifying the direction of the students' attention. In addition, having followed an inductive method for data analyses, it was avoided to limit the results to Marton's (1994) dichotomy 'understanding' versus 'memorizing', and so a few interesting findings emerged.

All the subjects, including those that have produced less satisfactory summaries, used the word '**understanding**' or '**to understand**' in their accounts. Phenomenographers in the field of education pay special attention to what the students might mean by 'understanding'; often, they explicitly ask their subjects to express what they believe understanding to be. In this study, initially there was no intention to generate data of the subjects' views of understanding; it was rather raised quite naturally during the interviews. Being aware that the students might give various meanings to the word 'understand', they were explicitly probed during the interviews give more explanations.

Having this in mind, the analysis of the data revealed that the variation of their focus of attention depended on what they meant by 'understanding'. So, how did the students' outcomes vary in terms of attention?

The students seemed to have oriented their attention to different aspects in the task and therefore fell into one of these categories:

- i) **Category A:** Understanding discrete pieces of information.
- ii) **Category B:** Understanding the relationship between various pieces of information.
- iii) **Category C:** Focus on how information could be related to the course knowledge.

**i) Category A: Focus on understanding discrete information**

**• Description of the category:**

The students in this category focused their attention on discrete elements of the texts they were summarizing. They related their experience of 'understanding' the text to understanding:

- discrete terms/ words,
- discrete details such as examples,
- discrete facts, and
- discrete sentences or paragraphs of the text.

By discrete it is meant single or separate elements of the text without necessarily relating them to each other. It was such a recurrent term in the findings of Marton and Saljo's (1994) phenomenographic study about the student's approaches. They used the word in order to describe their subjects' inability to link various pieces of information in order to reach understanding. The students in this category reported having achieved understanding of the text simply because they understood discrete information in the texts. In other words, their understanding depended and was limited exclusively to one or more discrete pieces of information in the text mentioned above.

A common feature in this category was that the students were not clear as to the way their understanding could be achieved. In fact, their experience of 'understanding the text' did not extend to understanding some text information separately. Here are typical illustrations of this category:

First, I read the whole text, but I tried to answer the questions I was reading one sentence after another, and underline the main words, and after that I started writing my summary directly, we didn't have time. (S32, passage 2)

Student 35 seemed to have been focusing on discrete paragraphs instead. The following is an extract from her interview:

Well, I have a method when reading texts, I read every single paragraph several times and try to understand it before I move on to the next paragraph, I can't carry on reading without having fully grasped the first paragraph. (S35, passage 1)

- **Key Features:**

In most of the cases depicted in this category, the students referred to their focus as having been given to 'every fact', 'every information', and 'every word'(1)for these students, understanding the text depended directly on understanding single separate words(2). The following are typical examples of students describing the ways of tackling the tasks:

I was reading every word (1), one word after another. (Student31, passage 1)

I focused on the details and any information (1) that can help me understand the text. (S13 Passage 2)

I concentrated on the difficult words (1), I know they were the key, if I understand them, I can understand everything(2)(S4, passage 1)

Understanding the key terms, difficult words, and examples, which have an illustrative role in the text, would have absolutely enabled the readers to understand the arguments of the author. However, limiting understanding to these discrete elements becomes a hindrance for the students' comprehension of information globally, which does not lead to satisfactory understanding. This difficulty in understanding the meaning of the text (3) was voiced by the students in this category. The following are typical examples:

There were a lot difficult words, I tried to understand them but it was not easy, that's why I did not get it (3), so I took some information from each paragraph and put it in my paper(3)(S25, passage 2)

I was looking for examples (1), because they help me to understand, like in text we had last week, it contained a lot of examples and that's why I could understand, but in this one, I didn't find any examples, it was complicated, I didn't get it(3)(S22, passage 2)



Taking into consideration the last case, Svensson (1997) reported similar findings in his study about the students' approaches to studying the content of the lectures. He found out that some students did not make a distinction between the main information and its illustration, and as a consequence allocating equal importance to both the examples and the ideas they illustrate. For him (ibid), a student's inability to distinguish between the importance of the examples and the message of the text is called **'horizontation'** in learning (Svensson: 1997). While the same tendency was observed in the subjects of this category, one might be reluctant to call this approach 'horizontation'. This is because the subjects of this study appeared to have directed their attention to discrete examples not only considering them as important as the message of the text, but rather as a basis for their understanding. Put differently, the subjects in this category reported having focused their attention on examples, giving them more importance than the main arguments. The general tendency is to 'focus on discrete information', rather than 'horizontation'. This tendency was checked when looking at their intention, which seemed to more to complete the tasks than to understand the learning materials deeply. This aspect of our findings is discussed in the next section about the student's intentions.

Other students (S8, S9, S22, S23, S26, and S31) reported having paid attention to identifying the 'difficult' or 'new' terms (4) in the text and googled them (S10 and S21) for more clarification. This focus of attention was the most common among all the students interviewed. However, the difference between the students was not the attention that they paid to the new terminology in the text, but rather whether or not these students attempted to go beyond those discrete terms and expressions. The accounts of these students revealed that the students in this category limited their understanding to these terms separately. The statement of S21 best illustrates

this case in which she started describing her thoughts when she started the task of summarizing:

I first I read the whole text, but then I tried to go deeper, I tried to understand the whole concept of the text and then I tried to go deeper to understand the whole areas of the text, ummm, I was reading and writing at the same time. There was difficult vocabulary, but I tried to google it directly(4) , so I found the definitions on Wikipedia directly. After that I started to do the summary(5).

S21 example is interesting in the sense that the student described the process of understanding the text using words like reading the text 'globally, and trying to go deeper, and understanding 'the whole' text, but then she did not seem to have gone beyond checking the meaning of the 'difficult vocabulary'. This might suggest that going deeper in the understanding of the text 'globally' for this student does not extend understanding the meaning of the difficult words. The evidence is that S21 made a direct link between her attempts to clarify a few terms and writing the summary. Indeed, S21, like the other students depicted in this category, seemed to believe that understanding the key words solely would enable her to understand the message of the text.

It should be emphasized that common to all the students that identified as having paid attention to discrete ideas did not show any attempt to go beyond understanding the Key words. In other words, their attempt to 'understand' was directly associated with 'understanding the difficult vocabulary/terms'. In addition, unexpectedly, the activity of 'trying to make sense of the text' and that of summarizing were experienced as two separate activities (6). These themes of expanding awareness are best illustrated in the following interview extract:

**S31:** The text before was not very difficult. I understood the main idea before you explained it. But this one was hard, and I didn't get it.

**Inter:** Why?

a) Understanding the text is associated with the of the new terms.

**S31:** The text of today had so many new words. I couldn't understand them(a).

**Inter:** How about text 1?

**S31** Yeah, it had new words, but I could get them. But in the text of today, the terms were difficult (a).

**Inter:** Okay. What else you did to understand the text?

**S31:** To be honest, I didn't do anything, as the terms were difficult (b), and even my friends did not know them.

**Inter:** So, how did you summarize the text?

**S31:** [...] I took the main ideas of all the paragraphs, and write them in my summary in my own way(c).

b) No attempt to look for a different way to understand the text.

c) Summarizing is not based on understanding the main ideas.

This extract raises some interesting issues not just in relation to focus of attention but also to the student autonomy in learning. We can observe how the student did not manage to solve the problem of what she referred to as 'difficult terms' in the text. She reflected a dependency on both the text and her classmates '*even my classmates did not know them*'. It is apparent that she did not attempt to find another way to achieve understanding of the text, except to ask her classmates for clarifications. Moreover, S31 appeared to have perceived the task of reading and summarizing as two separate activities; for her, she was able to summarize a passage that she initially had not understood. In this case **the activity of summarizing is detached from understanding**; it seems an imposed activity that had to be completed and so does not have to reflect necessarily her personal understanding. In this case, one might conclude that these students not only did not attempt to relate discrete ideas of the text to each other, but also did not relate the separate parts of the same material to each other; each activity and each question was dealt with for its own sake, and not to achieve a global understanding.

Besides, the students focus on discrete pieces of information had led the students to misunderstand the way various lectures could be related to each other **(7)**. Said differently, these students' focus on separate the terms

separately did not allow them to see the linguistic knowledge more globally, and so failed effectively understand the course content. This can be best illustrated this extract:

**Inter:** Do you believe that there is link between today's lecture and the previous one?

**S10:** Yes of course, because last lecture we talk about how language is about stimulus-response, while nowadays we refuted the ideas, we get another idea, Chomsky's idea(7).

Inter: Do you mean today's lecture?

S10: Yes, today's lecture.

Inter: And how about last week's lecture?

S10:It was about how language is stimulus-response and the verbal behavior(7).

In this extract, S10 seemed to have simply retained the terms that were mentioned in the previous lecture 'stimulus-response' and 'verbal behavior' but obviously did not understand the idea behind. The student's focus on the terms separately from the message of the whole text resulted in a misunderstanding of the previous lecture as being about the stimulus-response theory, while it was rather introducing Chomsky's ideas. This focus of attention on discrete elements seems to be the main reason why he was not able to perceive the link between the two lectures.

Thus, students in this category shared a common perception of the role of **the text as being authoritative**, in other words, the text represents the main source of understanding. For example, the students did not mention having relied on their background knowledge of the topic. In fact, they seemed not have gone beyond the boundaries of the text to understand the message that the author wanted to convey.

In the next section, we are going to demonstrate how other students paid attention to the same details, but at the same time their main focus went

beyond the discrete elements of the texts and materials; they focused on finding associations with the different pieces of information. This has suggested a different and more advanced way of approaching the learning materials

- **Category B: Focus on How Information Could be Related to Each Other within the Text**

i) **Description of the Category:**

A few students (S6, S8, S25, S27, and S34) were interested **in the main idea conveyed by the text, instead of isolated ideas**, i.e., the main message that the author wanted to convey. Their attention was paid to and to the way the various pieces of information of the text could be related to each other to understand the whole message. The students were interested in more than understanding fragmented information; they explicitly expressed their dissatisfaction with merely understanding the main terms of the text or single paragraphs separately from the whole text. In other words, understanding the text for them meant understanding how the various details and ideas could be related to each other to understand the whole message of the text. The main concern of these students was to obtain a global understanding of the text and that is the reason why they did not try to go beyond the text boundaries. The following extract is a typical illustration of this category:

Inter: What did you do to understand the text?

S8: [...] I read the text, and tried to find the important words, and tried to understand them.

Inter: What do you mean by important words?

S8: Important words, technical words, that we did not learn before, about Chomsky. The text was difficult and complicated.

Here there is a clear expression of her dissatisfaction with merely understanding the 'technical words'. When probed for more information, here how she expressed her focus of attention:

Inter: Did you understand these technical words?

S8: Yes, I checked in the dictionary and others I could understand when I read it many times. But it was complicated and not easy to understand the text.

Inter: What was difficult about it?

S8: Because, I understood everything, all the paragraphs, but I couldn't I find the link between the paragraphs, I didn't get it easily. Each paragraph had an idea, and I understood some ideas, but I was not sure, I tried to find the link between the ideas of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, and between ideas of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph.

The main concern was clearly expressed: looking for the way various paragraphs could relate to each other, as this seemed to be the most effective to understand the message of the text, as expressed in the rest of the interview:

Inter: Why is it important for you to understand the link between the paragraphs?

S8: Yes, because you cannot, you cannot understand only one paragraph and you say I understood everything. You need to understand the text in general.

- **Key Features:**

The extract above summarizes the key features in this category. The focus of attention was laid on the way:

- Various paragraphs could relate to each other.
- Examples in the text could be related to the texts' main ideas.

Understanding the texts this category was achieved through understanding how the various paragraphs could be linked to each other. They started with focusing on understanding each paragraph separately but only as a first step(1), their main focus was on finding the 'link' between these

paragraphs(2). S6 was one of the students who explicitly expressed this concern:

I understood the text, I mean I read the paragraphs and I understood them (1), they were not difficult; but it was the link between the paragraphs, this I didn't get(2). (S6, passage 1)

Observably, the student was not satisfied with her understanding when she simply understood each paragraph separately; she conceived understanding as referring to 'global understanding' instead of 'fragmented understanding'.

Other students were interested in finding the meaning of the text through understanding the link between the example mentioned in the text and the texts' main ideas (3). As an illustration, S25 reported the following when she was asked about the way she went about reading passage 1:

**Inter:** What were you looking for while reading the passage?

**S25:** I focused on the example in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph(3). It helped us to get the idea of text what it was about. So, I was looking for the link between the example and the main ideas(3).

**Inter:** Did you find this link?

Thanks to focus, the students managed to obtain a deeper understanding of the texts as compared to students depicted in the previous category, as illustrated in the same interview extract:

**S25:** Yes, I understood that text has one main idea, that children do not learn their language by imitation, and so that Skinner was wrong.

The focus of the students' attention in category B was on the *text itself*, its meaning and message. Using Svensson's (1997) terminology, the text is therefore *atomized*; that is to say, the text is singled out and not considered in

relation to the whole knowledge acquired either during the course, or beyond (Marton, 1997). The students who have the tendency to atomize the text often fail to relate the text to the whole lecture or the course content. In category C, however, the students were found to have had have paid attention to elements beyond the text boundaries as we shall see in the next category.

**iii- Category C: Focus on how Information could be related to the course Knowledge**

• **Description of the Category:**

In this category, the students S1, S2, S14, S19, S21, and S36 were concerned with relating the texts' information to the knowledge they had received in the course of linguistics. They were searching for elements beyond the text that would allow them to best understand the materials in hands. For these students, understanding the text could be reached not just through linking ideas within the text but also through putting this information in the wider context of the course as a whole. They commonly evoked information they learned in the previous lecture(s). Common to the experience of these students was their interest not just in the author's message but also in the objectives of the lecture intended by the teacher. In fact these students constantly evoked the teacher's objectives in their accounts. As an illustration, the following interview extract shows how S2 was aware of the link between the text's main ideas and the previous lecture:

"(...) and I think that the last lecture we were presented this idea. We talked about LAD. Yes, you presented what we were going to have and that behaviourism was based on stimulus-response"

• **Key Features:**

In this category, the students focused their attention on:

- Relating ideas of the text in hands to the previous lecture.
- Relating ideas from the text to the course of linguistics in general



- Relating the texts key words to the terminology they already learned in linguistics.
- Relating the text information to their personal background knowledge about the topic of language acquisition.

The students in this category seemed to be constantly concerned evoking the ideas they understood from the previous lecture while reading the text in hands **(1)**. This led them to pay attention to any details**(2)** that would make them establish this link to better understand the text **(3)**.The following is an interesting illustration of this focus of attention taken from the account of S19:

Inter: How did you go about reading the text?

S19: I was first trying to look for any details (2) that help me to have information about the author (2).

Inter: What do you mean?

S19: I tried to look at the reference and see if it was written by Bloomfield or skinner (2). Because the text was about imitation and reinforcement, and I wanted to understand if the author was against behaviorism or not (3).

Inter: Did you manage to understand what you were looking for?

S19: Yes.

Inter: How? Can you explain more?

S19: Yes, so I tried to understand the examples(1) and to see what we did befor ein the lessons to see if the ideas are in the text (2).

and there was the theory of stimulus-response that said that we learn language from the environment, but in the text todaywe kind of have a different way of thinking (3).

In this extract, S19 clearly was looking for information that would relate to the previously studied information in order to build and

understanding of the text she was reading. Understanding the detail was only a means to an end and not the end itself.

Another way of relating the text information to previous knowledge was to put the text in the wider context of the course of linguistics(4). For example, S1 sought details and tried to understand the new terminology; yet, she went beyond relating the text ideas to the previous information, but also explicitly paid attention to the way this new information would contribute to understanding the course in general, as illustrated in the following extract:

Inter: How did you go about reading the text?

S1: First, I just skimmed through the passage, and then scanned it looking for specific details (1). I underlined the words that I met for the first time (1).

Inter: What kind of details were you looking for?

S1: I was looking for the key words (1), the terms that refer to anything to help me understand.

Inter: To understand, okay? What were you looking for exactly?

Stud: I was looking for the link between what we did, behaviorism, and what we were going to discover (4).

Asking her for more clarifications, S1 made the following interesting comments:

Inter: Did you understand that link?

S1: Yes.

S1: We already studied behaviourism, and I knew that this lecture is going to continue to talk about this theory, so I was looking for these new ideas in the text about this theory (a).

Inter: And what were these new ideas you got from your reading?

Stu: That behaviorism is not perfect. It was not the only theory in linguistics (b). So, I knew we are going to talk about this theory and how it disappeared (a).

a) Anticipating the content of the new lecture, and this helped her to expect the link between the lectures.

b) making conclusions based on her personal understanding.

At first glance, the account of S1 did not seem any different or special; just like most students she reported having been looking for details in the text, such as the new terminology. However, compared to the students reported in pervious category, S1 appeared clearer about the details she was looking for, in other words she was selective when it came to details she was attending. As can be seen from her account above, S1 was very much concerned with searching for new terminology, like most students. However, this seems to be only one step in her process of understanding the text in relation to the knowledge she brought into the classroom. For this student 'understanding' the text engaged her in looking for the relationships between what she knows and the information the texts writer wants to convey.

Another student (S2) focused her attention to relating key words found in the text to those already learned in the previous lecture(5), as illustrated below:

[...] actually, Chomsky was refuting this idea. He gave his opinion. He said that language is stimulus-free and he referred to this by the term 'creative aspect of language'(5). [...]and we talked about generative grammar (5) and he gave us examples of native speakers and how generative grammar is innate, and the term he used is intra... inter... uhm..

Inter: Intrinsic?

S2: Yeah, intrinsic(5), it was the term I didn't understand and I looked for in the dictionary.

This extract shows how the student interestingly evoked ideas from the previous lecture. She managed to make a direct and effective link between two key words in the two passages, which were 'stimulus-free' taken from passage 1, and 'the creative aspect of language' in passage 2, and also understood the example in passage 1 and directly relate it to the term 'intrinsic', one of the main terms in passage 2. This was common to the students in this category.

Another way of relating information to each other was depicted and cannot be overlooked. Students S14 and S21 reported overwhelmingly their constant attempt to relate the information to their personal experience of language acquisition. For example student 14 stated the following:

I found the text very interesting. I learned many things about how we acquire language. I was thinking about my little sister when she started to talk. This text reminded me about her mistakes, and I thought we had to correct her each time. After I read the text, I understood that that was the behaviorist view. In reality, the kids do not learn language by repetition, they speak naturally

Another student (S21) made similar statement:

The information today was really interesting. I didn't know that the kids don't learn to speak without corrections. I always thought about how I could teach my children in the future to speak Arabic and English also, and I didn't know what to teach them first, Arabic or English. I learnt for the first time that kids can learn every language they hear, they just have to be exposed to it.

For these students the information was meaningful and relevant to their personal experiences. They were constantly relating the information to their personal experiences. One might say that they found the experience of tackling the learning materials as personally relevant. Through their accounts, they seemed not only having grasped the information in the text, but also the purpose of the text, as they seemed very at ease with connecting the technical information to their personal life.

While the connection between the various lectures seems to be obvious, the data revealed that not all the students were able to perceive it or if perceived failed to see its importance in understanding the new learning materials. This was a key distinction between this category and categories A and B as far as attention is concerned. Talking about the link between the two lectures was completely ignored or overlooked the students depicted in the previous categories. For the category C students, understanding cannot be

reached if the relationship between the knowledge obtained from the various lectures is not grasped.

#### **4.3.2.3- Variations in the Students' Intentions: Categories of Description**

The third step in the framework for data analysis was to consider the data to discuss any findings that might indicate the students' intentions when they directed their attention to different aspects. This is because one cannot obtain a complete picture of the students' experience without analyzing the subjects' intentions while performing the task (Entwistle, 1997; Trigwell and Prosser, 1999).

The data of the present study, the students' attention and intentions often merged together, and in order to obtain information about the underlying intentions, the students were explicitly asked to reflect on their intentions using some probs. For example, each time the students made any comments about any elements they focused on, a question is asked to allow them to explain the reasons for directing their attention to one aspect of the task/text instead of another. In some cases, the answers of some students were not always explicitly indicating their intentions, and so these latter were mostly inferred from the whole interview.

The students were found to have three distinct intentions when tackling the materials, one group of students expressed their intention to finish the task as fast as possible within the time limits set by the teacher, while another expressed the intention not only to complete the tasks but also to look for the inherent meaning. A third group of students reported to have looked for more than the inherent meaning of the text, but also the meaning of the text within the knowledge already received during the course of linguistics.

i) **Category A: Intention to Complete the Task**

• **Category of description:**

It was anticipated in the previous sections that the students' intentions were related to the features to which their attention was directed. It was found out that the students who directed their attention to discrete pieces of information or features in the texts had one main intention, which is to complete the task within the time set by the teacher. The students holding this intention did not see the need to reflect over the meaning of the information they were summarizing. For them, the importance of the task was judged by whether or not it contributed to improving their grades. Consequently, the students tended to simplify the task of summarizing to merely rewriting the original text into a shorter version. The learning material in general was not taken as an opportunity to learn and improve knowledge about a linguistic topic. The following extract was selected as an illustration of this category:

S23: I was trying to understand the main ideas of the text, and I underlined the key words and new ideas (...)I took the notes and I write the summary.

Inter: Did you write what you understood.

S23: No, I just took the main ideas from the text, and after I started to write the summary. I was not sure, the text was difficult, but I was obliged to read and read the paragraphs to get the ideas because...yeah... I did not have enough time to write the summary.

• **Key Features:**

This intention emerged when these students' accounts expressed the following:

- Students did not see the need to think about what the text was about.
- The learning task was simplified and not taken as an opportunity to learn.

- The learning material was not important as it did not directly affect their grade.

The students in this category typically expressed the intention to simply complete the task **(1)** with very little thinking over the intended message of the author or the teacher. In fact, these students recognized that she was completing the task of summarizing with very little reflection over the meaning **(2)** of the text as she thought it was not what she was required to do **(3)**. According to these students, reflection is required only when they are explicitly asked to. This can be seen in this extract from the interview with S5:

**S5:** I didn't write about my understanding **(2)**, it was a summary, I cannot, it's just a summary **(3)**. If the question was: tell us about what you understand **(3)**, I could do this, but in the question it tells me to summarize.

**Inter:** Is this the reason why you did not change the order of the ideas of the text in your summary?

**S5:** Yes, in the summary, we have to follow the text, and cannot say something that is not in the text **(3)**.

Two important observations can be made in relation to this extract: First, it can be observed that this student considered the task of summarizing as a simple activity which does not require a lot of effort, and consequently her main intention when tackling the learning material was not to reflect over the message of the text she was reading but rather completing the task in the fastest and simplest way possible. According to S5, the materials did not require reflection or expression of understanding as there was no need to think about the message of the text. Second, there seems to be a link between the students' intention and its effect on the way she went about completing the task. For example, she could not summarize the text in a personal way based on her understanding because according to her this **should not be** her main task.

S31 held the same intention of the learning materials as can be seen in her response to the same questions that were asked to S5:

S31: I understood that there were two main ideas in the text.

Inter: Did you write these two ideas in your summary.

S31: In my summary? No, no, I didn't(3).

Inter: Why not?

S31: because I was writing a summary of the text (1), I don't tell what I understand, I say what it is about (2).

The student's intention to simply do a task that was assigned by the teacher is clearly expressed in this extract. Like all the students in this category, this intention is strongly expressed. This is even more explicitly in the rest of the extract:

S31: [...] because it was easy to write the summary.... I had all the main ideas of all the paragraphs, so I took them and write my summary.

As already seen in the analysis of the students' summaries, the task of summarizing for S5 and S31 was simpler than reflecting over the message of the text; it was the activity of deleting unnecessary ideas and selecting what they judge to be the main ideas to be rewritten in a shorter version. This conception of the activity of summarizing seemed to have been affected by their intention, which did not extend rewriting the original text in a shorter version. Furthermore, the steps they had learnt about summarizing had simply to be respected; they did not find the need to approach the task in any personal way. A similar tendency is noticed in S8 statement:

I followed the order of the ideas in the text, yeah, it's a summary, and you know, I can't change the order of the ideas, when I write a summary, I have to respect the main ideas of the text.



Besides, the students' intention to complete the task was associated with this students' extent of engagement. These students seemed to be more concerned with doing the task within the time constraints(4), and consequently focused her attention on the elements that would help her achieve this aim. In the extract above, S5, stated that she '*was obliged*' to do the effort to understand. She perceived the task as an imposed activity that simply had to be completed. This is another illustration of this tendency:

I had to write the main ideas of the text in the summary quickly(6), the teacher didn't ask us to write what we think about the text. So I just did the summary(6). (S15)

These students typically **detached** themselves from the learning tasks and did not manage to see their direct relevance to their personal learning or experience. For example, some of them also expressed their efforts to understand the text and the learning material in general (7); yet their attempt to understand the text was meant to complete the task and not to obtain knowledge about the topic of the text(8). This was also due to the fact that they believed it was rather the teacher's role to explain the meaning of the text, and not theirs(9). In addition, the students typically considered reading the text and summarizing it as two different activities. This way of detaching themselves from the learning task is illustrated in this extract:

**Inter:** Did you understand the main idea of the text?

**S20:** Yes, I think I understood(7), it was not a difficult text, but I'm not sure.

**Inter:** Did you write what you have understood in your summary.

**S20:** Oh, in my summary? Why (9)? I didn't have time. Well, I wrote the main ideas of each paragraph, I omitted all the details and I started writing the summary. For understanding the text, yes of course, I tried to understand (7) but I knew that you (the teacher) are going to explain it later(9).

In addition, for these students any effort to compete and understand the task depended on whether task would contribute to their grades in the end of the term. The students' concern about the assessment in the course seemed to have affected the way they tackled the learning material(10). In fact, the students depicted in this category often justified their intention with reported having had very little interest in the material. Here is a typical illustration:

I simply took the main ideas I did, and rewrite them in a summary. To be honest I didn't do lot of effort. I knew that the task is not going to be marked ... 'je me suis pas cassé la tête'(10). (S25)

Similarly, S40 expressed her tendency to have been less engaged in classroom activities as they were not directly contributing to her grade:

Inter: Did you revise your summary?

S40: No, I did not have time. Usually I revise when I write something. In exams for example, I revise the answers and correct of course the mistakes. But for this summary, it was just an activity(10).

Inter: Do you think this activity is not as important as the exam?

S40: Of course, the activity was for the lesson, it is not a test(10).

What is worth noting is that the interview questions did not include any questions about the students' concerns about assessment, and yet these subjects evoked the topic of evaluation and assessment quite naturally as being important in their leaning experience. In fact, as will be evoked in the discussion and interpretation of the results, the theme of assessment emerged throughout the study in the students' accounts about their experiences, which might indicate the role that it plays in shaping their learning experience to which I will return in the interpretation of the findings.

The extracts reported above were recurrent in all the interviews with the students identified in this category. Indeed, because the main intention of these students was to look for the most practical and **conventional way** to

complete the task instead of making sense of the material as whole, it was expected that they intended to complete the task without much questioning and reflection. In his study, Svensson (1999) had a similar finding and referred to this approach as **ritualized approach**. For him, this approach is a reflection of the superficial way of learning, where the students tackled any learning material in a well-recognized procedure, following fixed process, and without much reflection over the materials deep meaning.

**ii) Category B: Intention to Look for the Hidden Meaning:**

• **Description of the Category:**

In this category, a few students (S6, S8, S25, S27, S29,S36) had intentions that could be distinguished from the students reported in category A in that they intended to understand the message beyond the surface information presented in the text; they were searching for the message conveyed in the text. The students in this category were concerned with the completion of the task, but that was not their end-aim, their intention was mainly to look for ‘the hidden meaning’ as literally put by S6, which would be an illustration of this category:

I was reading, and I think it understood a bit the text, but I was trying to find, uhm, well to get uhm, the meaning, uhm the ‘hidden meaning’, yes the hidden meaning. This was difficult.

The expression ‘hidden meaning’ was immediately thought-provoking in that it refers to what Marton’s refers to as a deep was of approaching learning. In this extract, S6 recognized having understood bits of the information she was reading, but was clearly not satisfied with that outcome. Her dissatisfaction with her understanding was explicit in her account; she expressed the difficulty to understand the ‘hidden meaning’ of the text, which

was her intention when tackling the task. Said differently, for S6 understanding bits of information for this subject cannot satisfactory. S6 was therefore associating the term understanding with 'understanding the hidden meaning'.

- **Key Features:**

Category B student intended to:

- Understand the message the author wanted to convey.
- Understand the message/ information that the teacher wanted to teach.
- Understand the link between the ideas of the texts' paragraphs.

The students, who had the intention to look for the inherent meaning, typically expressed their concerns about "*getting the message of the author*"(1) as expressed by S36 (passage 2). For example, S 25 and S29 accounts interestingly suggested their intentions to write about their understanding precisely because of the time constrains (2).

S25: I didn't have time (2), I spent a lot of time to read the text. I was trying to understand the main idea (1). Yeah... and also I didn't have enough time to write the summary. I just started to write what I understood from the text (2).

This intention engaged the students into summarizing the text in what she thought was an unusual way of summarizing (3):

Inter: How did you organize the ideas of your summary?

S29: I didn't structure the summary the way I was supposed to do (3).

Inter: Why do you think so?

S29: I tried to paraphrase the main ideas of every paragraph. I started with the main idea of the text and not with the introduction of the text, for me the main ideas was like an introduction(3). And then I wrote the idea of the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, and then the 3<sup>rd</sup>, but the first idea that the stimulus-response was a myth, I didn't write this.

[...]

S29: [...] I neglected the first idea that the imitation in language was a myth.

Inter: Why?

S29: I didn't have enough time, so I just put down what I understood (2).

As can be seen in S29 account, the students in this category adopted a different approach from those in category A. For example, dealing with time constrains, Students 5, 10, 22, 23, and 31 identified in the previous section, simply intended to finish the task reporting the text word by word with a few details deleted. However, S29, cited in this category, intended to reflect on what she understood to cope with the same constrains "*I didn't have enough time, so I just put down what I understood*". It was previously reported how the students who attempted to finish the task in more or less a superficial way relied exclusively on the text information in their reconstruction of the original texts.

Besides, the students in this category were interested not only in the hidden meaning of the text, but also in the message that the teacher wanted to convey through the text **(4)**. This appeared through their constant reference to the teacher's objectives and intentions, as can be seen in this illustration taken from the interview with S25:

**Inter:** Why did you spend a lot of time reading? Was the text difficult?

**S25:** [...] when I was writing my summary and I was thinking about if this summary is going to be good[...] I mean if you will find it good or not. I said to myself is this what she want me to understand?(4).

Furthermore, the students who had this intention to find the hidden meaning of the passage were also interested in finding the relationship between the various ideas of the paragraphs. Compared to the students in category A, these students' did not simplify the task of summarizing but instead were actively searching for the relationship between them with the intention to find out the main idea of the author. Unlike the students in

category A, it was their role to search for the meaning instead of waiting for the teacher to do it for them. In this case, the activity of summarizing was rather personal.

**Inter:** Tell me what do you mean exactly by the main message of the text? Could you explain more?

**S25:** Yes, I mean I could understand the ideas of each paragraph, but it was difficult to understand the relationship between the paragraphs. Because all the paragraphs had one main idea, I mean the text had one main idea, I was trying to understand this.

Another student, S36 spontaneously evoked her concern about the teacher's demands and expectations. Just like the other students depicted in this category, the intention of S36 was to get the message of the text, but at the same time, appeared to be constantly thinking about the teacher's expectations. Her account is cited below:

When I read the text I understood it had a direct relationship with behaviorism, it was about critics of behaviorism. But I don't remember that the word behaviorism was clearly mentioned. So I was too afraid to mention the word behaviorism or Chomsky, I had to follow the text

She carried on voicing her experience of summarizing as follows:

For me I didn't know that the teacher was expecting me to write this information or not, that's why I didn't write this, I respected the text. For me I don't know about the expectations of the teacher. For me you need precise answers and short answers.

S36 was searching for the meaning of the text but her anxiety about the teacher's reaction to her ideas was rather a hindrance and limited her summary to the text boundaries, although she explicitly expressed her intention to find the message of the text. In fact, the case of 36 is interesting as it raises the question of anxiety in the study of linguistics, when the students in this category thought about the teacher's objectives in that lecture, they engaged in active thinking over the message behind the surface information,

but in some other cases, such as the case of S36, it was rather an obstacle. The case of S36 was really unique because she reported her deception as to the mark she obtained in the 1<sup>st</sup> term exam. And this experience seemed to have affected her self-confidence in writing answers. Again, this account evoked the topic of assessment and its effect on the students' experience of studying linguistics, to which I will return in Chapter Four.

Summarizing this category, one might emphasize the students' intention to find the message intended by the author and that intended by the teacher. In so doing, they did not detach themselves from the learning task, but chose instead to involve themselves in searching for the message intended by both the author and the teacher. The students depicted here also complained about the time constraints, but this did not lead them to simplify reading a mere extraction of the main ideas of each paragraphs and did not thought of a summary as a simple activity of passively rewriting those main ideas without thinking over the logical relationship between them.

**iii) Category C : Intention to understand the message of the text in relation to the course of linguistics:**

**• Description of the Category:**

Six students (S1, S2, S14, S19, S29, S34) were identified to have had the intention to understand the message of the text in relation to the knowledge obtained in the various lectures of the linguistics course. In this category, the students tended to refer explicitly to their intention to go beyond understanding the 'hidden meaning' of the text to obtain an understanding of the text in relation to other lectures of linguistics. Having this intention in mind, the students expressed their interest to understand the link between the various lectures within the course of linguistics. In this category, the students were not interested in the text per se, their aim was to improve their general linguistic knowledge in a coherent way; said differently, their

intention was to obtain a holistic understanding of the various lectures. This category is typically reflected in this quotation by S1:

Inter: What were you looking for?

S1: The link between what we did, to link between behaviorism that we did and what we were going to discover.

- **Key Features:**

The students in this category had the intention to understand:

- the link between different linguistic theories,
- the link between different lectures of the course of linguistics.

The main intention expressed by these students was to relate pieces of information expressed in different lectures of the course **(1)**. They appeared to be fully aware of the knowledge previously taught and were therefore very much concerned with finding the link between the various theories or concepts **(2)**. This stemmed from their main intention to make sense of the knowledge they receive **(3)** not just each lecture separately but also the way they contribute to a global understanding of the concepts and theories within the general context of the course content **(4)**. Indeed, these intentions were clear in all the interviews of the students in this category. S1, for instance, expressed this intention right from the beginning of her interview:

**Inter:** Can you tell me about your general impression of the text?

**S1:** I think it's helpful, it's like a good way to introduce a new lecture, it's like moving from one idea to another**(1)**. From the idea of behaviorism to Chomsky**(2)**.

Inter: Okay, how about the text itself?

S1: 1<sup>st</sup> I didn't understand it well, until I read it several times. I could get the image of what is it talking about.

Inter: Can you tell me about this understanding you got after your several readings?



S1: That behaviorism is not the only way that shapes our life(2).

Inter: What do you mean exactly?

S1: Yes, behaviors, it's not the only thing that defines who we are, there are other things, internal things not just only external things, like feelings and emotions (1). Also, not just society defines who we are; we can define who we are(3). Yeah, It gives you the idea that no matter how behaviorism might seem right, it has problems, it's not perfect(4).

The same intention was depicted in the experience of S14:

**Inter:** What were you looking for when you were reading the text?

**S14:** When I understood the main idea of the text, I wrote it down, and I was thinking about the theory of Chomsky(3) and how it, I mean, what is the difference between this theory and the theory of stimulus-response (4).

As can be seen in these extracts, the students appeared not to be satisfied only by understanding of the text; this was clearly not their end-aim. They intended to understanding the text in relation to what they had already studied.

One of these students was actively searching for the meaning of the text in relation to the linguistics course in general. As can be seen in the following extract taken from the interview with S19, her interest in the knowledge of that specific lecture led her to reflect over the objective of the course of linguistics in general(5):

S19: The idea of the text was interesting, and I think this is the first time I understand why are we studying linguistics(5)?

Inter: Ok, can you explain more?

S19: In the beginning I didn't get it especially in the first semester when we studied the historical periods and after that we studied Saussure, I really couldn't understand, what was the relationship between them (4)?

Inter: Do you mean you didn't understand the lectures? Were they difficult?

S19: No, they were not difficult, I understood everything, and I had a good mark, but I didn't understand the idea: why do we study all this, and what was the relationship between Saussure and the classical period (5)?

Interestingly these students thought of the course content in a personal way, that is to say, they critically considered the content of the various lectures to understand better their own language(s). This intention reflects a high conception of learning and a deep way of approaching their studies(6). This is best illustrated in the rest of S19 interview:

Inter: And how did this lecture help you?

S19: I understood that we have to learn about how different people have different theories and opinions about language and how do we learn our languages(6).

This student was able to put the information of the text within the wider context of the course. Indeed, the students in this category typically expressed their awareness of the general objectives of the course(7) and made reference to their emphasis on the way the various lectures could be related to each other. This is illustrated in this extract from the interview with S2:

The module of linguistics talks about the schools of linguistics, so I know that you are going to talk about a new school and a new theory in linguistics and I have to understand the difference between this theory and the others, between all of them (7).

In addition, one of the typical characteristics of this category is that the students did not hesitate to express their personal understanding of the information of the various lectures, which reflects their personal interest in the knowledge she was studying (8). This interest in the content of the lectures goes beyond the interest to understand the intention of the teacher or

the author of the text, which was expressed by the students in category B. S30 statement, is a typical illustration:

S30: I was looking for this new theory of Chomsky. I said it was 'surement' interesting, yes, because he could destroy behaviourism with his new ideas

S30 interest in the content of the lecture led her to question the knowledge (9) she was studying in various lectures and express personal thoughts about the linguistic information (10) , as can be seen in the rest of the interview:

Inter: What made the lecture interesting for you?

S30: Yes, of course interesting, I didn't know there is another theory that can destroy Behaviourism (9), I was thinking about Skinner as a genius, you know when he e about language and how babies learn their language(10). But then, Chomsky said that all what Skinner did was .... it was not the good way to explain how we learn our language. And I find the theory of Chomsky really interesting because of course we have to talk about the mind we cannot neglect the mind(10)... and also the emotions and the feelings. He is right, we are not like animals we have a mind and emotions(10).

Inter: Did Chomsky say this?

S30: Yes, I mean I could understand this from the texts and the lesson you explained(9).

The students' personal interest in the linguistic information is what made this category significantly above the previous ones. This will be more explicitly clarified in the next section.

#### **4.4- The Outcome Space:**

The outcome space is needed to make the insights obtained from the analysis of data more explicit, in which the focus is laid on the identification of the distinctive ways of experiencing the study of Linguistics in this text-based

experience of learning and forming categories of description that would identify the students' learning conceptions and approaches.

Given the complexity of the learning experience revealed in Sge2 data, a brief overview of the findings is first needed. The data analyzed in the previous section revealed that the students' learning outcomes fell into three different categories from the least to the most sophisticated one as illustrated in the figure below:

**Table 4.5 : The Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics**

<b>Category A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The summaries are reproduction of the original texts</i></li> <li>• <i>The attention paid to isolated elements and information</i></li> <li>• <i>The intention to complete the tasks</i></li> </ul>
<b>Category B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The summaries were reconstructions of the message of the text</i></li> <li>• <i>The attention was directed to the way the various pieces of information could be related to each other within the text.</i></li> <li>• <i>The intention was to understand the hidden meaning.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Category C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The summaries were reconstructions of the message of the text in relation to the course of linguistics.</i></li> <li>• <i>The attention was directed to the way the text's information could be related to the knowledge studied in the linguistics course in general.</i></li> </ul>

In Category A, which is the least sophisticated category, the learners focused their attention on isolated facts and information with the intention to complete an imposed task with little effort and motivation. Their summaries were mere reproductions of sentences randomly taken from the original text which were not written in a personal way. While in the most sophisticated category, the main concern of the students is to extract meaning and relate information to each other with the intention to obtain a holistic understanding of the message conveyed not just in the texts, but also

transmitted through the linguistic course in general. This intention led to the students to produce summaries that could be said to be rather reconstruction of the message of the text in relation to the background knowledge studied in the previous lectures. In the in-between category the attention of the students was given to the way the various pieces of information could be related to each other within the text with the intention to understand its hidden meaning. The summaries produced reflected the students' personal reflection over the message of the text.

What can these findings tell us about the students' experience of learning in terms of learning conceptions and approaches in the context of this study? Based on these findings, three main categories of description were formed for the students' conceptions of and approach to the study of linguistics. This outcome space is summarized in the table below:

**Table 4.6: The Outcome Space for the Students' Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics**

	<b>Cat A: Learning materials are external tasks to be completed</b>	<b>Cat B: Learning materials convey knowledge that should be seen holistically</b>	<b>Cat C: Learning materials convey knowledge that should be put in its wider context</b>
<b>Quality of the summaries</b>	The summary is a reproduction of the original text.	The summary should reflect personal understanding of the author's objective and text's meaning.	Summaries should reflect an understanding of the text within and in relation the whole context of the course of linguistics.
<b>Conception</b>	Learning is an imposed activity.	Learning is to have a coherent picture of knowledge.	Learning is to reflect over the knowledge in a global way.
<b>Approach</b>	Reproducing the received knowledge with minimal effort.	Understanding details precedes understanding the hidden message	Personally reflecting and reconstructing knowledge.

The table below provides an overview of the allocation of the students into the categories of description.

**Table 4.6: Allocation of Students into Categories of Description**

Stud. codes	Category	Stud. codes	Category
1	C	21	A
2	C	22	A
3	A	23	A
4	A	24	A
5	A	25	B
6	B	26	A
7	A	27	B
8	B	28	B
9	A	29	C
10	A	30	C
11	B	31	A
12	B	32	A
13	A	33	B
14	C	34	B
15	A	35	A
16	A	36	B
17	A	37	A
18	A	38	A
19	C	39	A
20	A	40	A

This table illustrates the allocation of the subjects according to the categories they held during their text-based experience of learning. It is not difficult to observe that most students fell in categories A and B. Less subjects displayed category C. These findings are important for the next stage where the findings are going to be analyzed to find out whether these subjects maintained the same level of learning approaches and conceptions; this will be discussed in the last chapter.

The findings represented by this outcome space and those obtained in the first stage of the study are to be discussed and interpreted in the final chapter in a way that would provide answers for the main research questions of this investigation.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter, the data obtained in Sge2 were both presented and analyzed following a justified and well-sustained framework adapted specifically for analyzing the complex data of this study. The analysis looked at the learning experience as incorporating complex relationships between the students' engagement with the designed learning materials and the actual production of the texts summaries. Particular emphasis was placed on exploring the qualitative outcomes of studying Linguistics, often overlooked in the traditional teaching practices.

The findings revealed interplay between the direction of the students' focus of attention, their expressed intentions, and the quality of their summaries. The outcome space of the students' learning experience in Stge2 revealed three different ways of conceiving and approaching the linguistic learning materials:

- Learning tasks are externally imposed materials that have to be completed implying little engagement and reflection over the objective of the materials.

- Learning materials convey knowledge that should be understood and approached holistically.
- Learning materials imply tasks that have to be understood in relation to information beyond the lecture and the course content.

These learning outcomes revealed a high variation that could not be perceived in normal teaching sessions since at the outset, the students appeared to have conceived the learning materials same way. How this variation is going to answer the research questions, and what implications this might have on teaching and research is going to be the focus of the next and final chapter of this dissertation.



**Chapter Five:**  
**Discussion, Interpretation, and**  
**Pedagogical Implications**

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Discussion, Interpretation, and Pedagogical Implications**

#### **Introduction:**

In this final chapter, the key findings are drawn together in order to answer the main research questions set in the beginning of this study. To this aim, the findings are going to be discussed along three main sections; sections 1 and 2 are devoted to the discussion of the findings of Sge 1 and Sge 2 respectively with the objective of answering the first two research questions along with the sub-research questions (See Chapter Two). These research questions seek to uncover the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches to the study of Linguistics (Research Question 1), and their conceptions and approaches to linguistic text-based tasks (Research Question 2). In section 3, the findings are discussed in order to answer the third research question, which aims at understanding the nature of the study of linguistics within the context of the present study. Given the inductive nature of this investigation, we will address any finding that were not explicitly targeted by the research questions but emerged during the study. The key findings are also going to be interpreted in relation to the existing literature in the field of phenomenographic research. This chapter concludes with pedagogical suggestions and implications from the findings of this study.

The discussion and interpretation of the findings is going to rely on the outcome spaces of both Sge 1 and Sge 2 reported in Chapter 3. The outcome space adopted for this study is hierarchical; i.e., includes categories of description that are mutually inclusive. It is also hierarchical in the sense that the categories of studying linguistics range from the least sophisticated to the most sophisticated one. In fact, the emphasis in this discussion of the findings will be on the way the various categories of description are related to each

other in a hierarchical inclusive way. Special attention will be given to the way study conceptions and approaches could be related to each other in both stages in order to see the experience of learning more globally.

Besides, the discussion is going to be done following the phenomenographic tradition to consider the conceptions and approaches according to different levels. It is commonly accepted in the literature to identify two or more levels, each containing a set of conceptions or approaches (Marton et al, 1993; Biggs, 1994; Marton and Booth, 1997; Chalmer and Fuller, 1996; McLean, 2001; and Ellis and Ellis, 2008). This way of discussing the findings of this study is going to help interpreting any potential relationship between the students' conceptions and approaches in their prior experience of studying linguistics.

### **5.1- Discussion and Interpretation of the Prior-Experience of Studying of Linguistics:**

The first research question of this investigation "What prior-experience do 2nd year students have about the study of Linguistics? aims at unveiling the prior-conceptions (Sub RQ A) and the prior-approaches (Sub RQ B) held by the participants. According to Marton et al (1993), any conception includes two components: a way of seeing *what* is learned, which is the referential aspect of the learning experience, and a way of seeing *how* it is learned, which is the structural aspect of the learning experience. While the referential aspect (what) refers to the meaning given to the phenomenon being experienced, the structural aspect (how) provides the structure of the awareness which derives from the data. The students' structure of the awareness refers to the focal points in their written accounts and interviews (Bruce, 1997). In our discussion of the findings, these two aspects are going to be highlighted in

order to be able to interpret them in the light of what has been found in the research literature.

As for the study approaches, Biggs (1997) suggested that each approach is a combination of the students' strategies and motives, which makes the categories relational. In other words, in forming these categories the emphasis was on the students' activity when studying linguistics along with their intentions i.e., *what* the student does and why the student adopts these strategy. Hence, the discussion in the following sections is based on these components.

#### **5.1.1- Prior-Conceptions of Linguistics:**

We start our discussion by addressing the first Sub research question: what prior-conceptions do the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the study of Linguistics? Four different prior-conceptions of Linguistics were identified in Sge 1: **Conception A:** Linguistics as a quantitative increase in knowledge about the historical and philosophical study of language; **Conception B:** Linguistics as the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge about the English language; **Conception C:** Linguistics as understanding practical knowledge and analyzing languages; and **Conception D:** Linguistics as making sense of the linguistic information and critically reflecting over languages.

These prior-conceptions expressed in the prior-experience of linguistics study are "discipline-dependent" (Marchall et al, 1999), and in this case they are contextually sensitive and can be said to be exclusive to this research. Said differently, these conceptions were not uncovered by existing research given that they are "*domain-specific*" (Marchall et al, *ibid*); this is as far as the referential aspect is concerned. Taking into consideration the structural aspect of the conceptions, which displays the focus of the students holding the conceptions, we can say that the findings are in line with the existing research on conceptions of learning including Biggs (1994), Burnett et al (2003), Ellis

et al (2008), Marton et al (1993) Marton and Booth (1997) , Tynjala (1997), Van Rossum and Hammer (2010). Each of these prior-conceptions identified in this study are discussed in what follows.

#### **5.1.1.1- Conception A: Linguistics as a Quantitative Increase in Knowledge about the Historical and Philosophical Study of Language**

In this basic conception, Linguistics is experienced as a quantitative increase in knowledge related to the historical development of language and Language study. According to the students holding this conception, the outcome of studying the Linguistics does not extend an accumulation of bits of information to be retained as preparation related to a few limited lectures in the course of Linguistics. These segregated bits of information are essentially retained in preparation for the end of term exam. Seeking understanding the information or extracting meaning from the lectures and learning materials is unnecessary; for these students understanding is not even required to prepare for the exams, only retention of information to be reproduced in any assessment occasion. As a consequence, this conception is marked by the absence of meaning as it is not necessary to think about the meaning of the pieces of information accumulated. In addition, this conception of Linguistics is characterized by absence of reflection over not only the purpose of the various lectures but also the potential relationship between them. Indeed, the absence of meaning from this conception made it the least advanced in the outcome space (Marton and Saljo 1993).

Besides, the main reason why this conception is considered as the least complex way of experiencing the study of Linguistics is that the focus of attention is too narrow since reference is made to two lectures exclusively from the 1<sup>st</sup> year course of Linguistics, which are: the historical development of language and the philosophical debates about language. These were the least important in the whole course since they were meant to broadly introduce the study of language for the 1<sup>st</sup> year students before gradually

moving on towards linguistic topics. Linguistic knowledge is consequently seen as an externally imposed entity, which was revealed by the students' lack of interest in looking for the purpose or meaning of the various lectures related to language analysis. In her study, Lucas (2000) referred to the absence of the students' attempt to reflect over the aim of the lectures or how they might be related to each other as a conception of the course as imposed, where the lectures become important only when they contribute to their pass mark.

This conception is similar to the '*quantitative increase in knowledge*' conception already identified by a number of seminal studies, including Saljo's (1979) early study on learning conceptions, in which he identified five learning conceptions of which "*a quantitative increase in knowledge*" was the least complex one. It was also identified by Georgia (1986) and Marton and Saljo (1993) as the basic conception expressed by their participants. This basic conception in these studies shares the same characteristics of the referential aspect with the conception identified in the present research, of which the absence of meaning is the most crucial one.

#### **5.1.1.2- Category B: Linguistics as the Acquisition and Accumulation of Knowledge about the English Language**

In this conception, Linguistics is experienced as the acquisition and accumulation information about the English language exclusively and not of language in general. In other words, studying Linguistics is viewed as accumulating information about English and at the same time a vehicle to develop the English language skills, especially those related to writing. However, the focus of their attention does not seem to be paid to the impact of the linguistic information on the English language proficiency outside of the classroom; rather, these students seem to emphasize the impact of the studied information on the grades obtained. Said differently, the students holding this conception hold the view that improving the English proficiency increases

their chances to obtain the pass grade both in Linguistics and other modules, which is their expected outcome of studying linguistics in this conception. This represented the referential aspect of the category.

The students' attention can be said to be broader than that depicted in category A, yet, it was too narrow in scope. The students attempted to go beyond the two first lectures of the 1<sup>st</sup> year course of Linguistics. Nevertheless, they were not able to capture the purpose of the linguistic analysis studied in the classroom and gave it a very narrow perspective, which is increasing knowledge about the English language exclusively and for assessment purposes. Thus, structurally, the analysis of language acquired in the linguistics course was perceived as important for their English language studies; yet, its importance remains theoretical; in other words, the students were not clear as to how this knowledge could be applicable in their studies. This inability of the students in applying the information is considered in phenomenographic research as reflecting limited learning conceptions. Information about Linguistic analysis, which was initiated in the 1<sup>st</sup> year course of Linguistics, is not perceived as beneficial for developing critical analysis of languages in general; its utility is conceived in terms of gaining more knowledge about how English functions, which will eventually improve the students' chances to obtain better grades. This confirms the finding reported in Van Rossum and Hammer's (2010) study about the students' conception of knowledge in which they concluded that the students holding a conception of knowledge as '*an increase in knowledge of limited information in units of teaching*' do not appear to consider learning as the object of reflection.

This conception can be said to be in line with the learning as 'an increase in knowledge' already identified by Georgia (1986), Marton and Saljo (1993) and Van Rossum and Hammer (2010), but at the same time shares other characteristics with the 'memorization and reproduction' identified by a number of phenomenographers in various contexts such as Saljo (1979),

Marton al (1993), Van Rossum and Taylor (1987), Biggs (1994), Marton and Booth (1997). The students in this study expressed the view of linguistics as more about accumulating or increasing knowledge about the English Language to be carefully reproduced in their studies in other modules; but mainly for assessment purposes. The information accumulated is not necessarily understood, but simply stored to be reproduced when necessary. Seeking meaning behind the information is absent and so this conception seems closer to 'memorization and reproduction' than to 'the acquisition of practical knowledge and application' conception identified in the different seminal studies. Therefore, it can be said that this finding is highly context-related.

Categories A and B represent the least sophisticated prior-conceptions of Linguistics study. They are characterized by the following:

- Referentially, Linguistics is understood in relation to very limited topics in the first year course of Linguistics.
- Fragmented and limited understanding of linguistics reflected in the students' difficulties to see the global objectives of the course in general.
- Structurally, Linguistic knowledge is fragmentally accumulated to be reproduced in any assessment occasions.

### **5.1.1.3- Category C: Linguistics as Understanding Practical Knowledge and Analyzing Languages**

This conception represents a shift in the students' understanding of linguistics from an accumulation of knowledge of fragmented and limited aspects of the linguistics course, to Linguistics as a reflection over the characteristics of languages. In contrast to conception B, the students holding this conception do not limit the study of linguistics to the English language exclusively; but



rather had a broader view over the importance of the linguistic knowledge. Indeed, studying linguistics in conception C is associated with the analysis of language, which implies a reflection over the way languages function on different levels: phonetic, phonological, semantic, syntactic, and morphological. The emphasis in this conception is on linguistic analysis and the way this knowledge can be used to understanding differences and similarities between various languages.

Therefore, the students' role in this conception is not limited to receiving and storing information transmitted by the teacher; reflecting over the information received is part of their experience of studying Linguistics. Furthermore, one of the distinctive features of this conception is the ability of the students' to relate the various pieces of information received in different lectures during the course. The students were able to have a more holistic view of linguistics. These features were reflected in the students' interest in the linguistic knowledge and so it is not experienced as an imposed subject, but instead as a subject that required understanding the meaning of the various branches of linguistics and involves the students into thinking about linguistic analysis. According to Marton and Saljo (1993), these learners do not consider knowledge as an 'external imposed phenomenon', but rather an 'internalized subject phenomenon'. In addition, the teacher in this conception is expected to go beyond the theoretical information to provide practical information about analyzing languages on different levels of linguistics.

This conception reflects a way of experiencing linguistic knowledge similar to that identified by Marton and Saljo (1997) as 'acquisition of practical knowledge and application' and 'applying'. According to Marton and Saljo (ibid) students holding this conception tend to pay attention to facts, methods or any other information in the course for subsequent utilization beyond examinations.

In fact, this conception is commonly depicted in students' learning experiences of subject specific knowledge. For instance, Crawford et al (1994) identified a conception of mathematics as rules and formulae that can be applied to solve problems. In a more recent study conducted by Paakkari et al (2011) on the students' conceptions of learning within health education, the students were found to conceive learning as application of acquired knowledge in practice. The students in the present study were not sure as to how or when this linguistic knowledge could be applied. This might be due to the fact that first year content provided an introduction to the principles of linguistic analysis.

Intestinally, the student in this category evoked the need to understand and retain information to be used in any future assessment occasions. However, retention of information in this category is not merely accumulating segregated pieces of information; it involves understanding the meaning of the information. To sum up, this prior-conception can be characterized by the following:

- Referentially, the students were able to distinguish linguistics as a distinct discipline; they did not show the confusion noted in the two first categories between Linguistics and history (as in category A) or English language skills (as in category B).
- Linguistic knowledge was useful as it enabled them to understand the difference between various languages.
- Linguistic knowledge requires understanding of linguistic terminology.
- Referentially, the students' understanding reflected a more global understanding of their linguistics lectures.

#### **5.1.1.4- Category D: Linguistics as Making Sense of the Linguistic Information and Critically Reflecting over Languages**

Two features make this conception the most sophisticated one in the outcome space: extraction of meaning and critical reflection over the linguistic knowledge. According to the students in this category, acquisition of linguistic information cannot be successfully done simply by storing bits of unrelated pieces of information, it has to be meaningful. Thus, the role of the student goes beyond receiving and storing information to personally constructing it.

The students expressed the need to questioning the linguistic information and relating it to their personal experiences outside of the classroom and beyond what the teacher has taught. Interestingly, they reported that the information acquired in the course triggered their curiosity and raised their interest to constantly ask questions about language. In this case the linguistic information received in their prior-experience was not just viewed holistically but also personally constructed. Said differently, the students were able not only to relate pieces of information acquired in the linguistics course, but also assess its importance and question it. As for the teacher's role is to provide information that raises their interest and emphasize comparison between various languages. In this case, studying Linguistics meant to enhance critical thinking about language.

The students who experienced linguistics study as critical reflection constantly referred to understanding the information as a result of intrinsically motivated and personally interested to acquire more linguistic information. This association between acquisition of information and personal interest was also found in Barranoik (2001) in which the participants identified in the most advanced conception also tackled classroom topics with a lot of interest and found them *"relevant to their current life situation"* . Despite the fact that this prior-conception is highly context-dependent, a number of phenomenographic studies identified conceptions where critical

reflection is the main feature. Sharma (2010) identified the most sophisticated conception of Accounting as interpreting reality and construction in which learning meant exploration through analysis and critical thinking. This conceptions is characterized by these referential and structural features:

- Students ' ability to distinguish linguistics, history and philosophy as three different disciplines.
- Linguistic knowledge was useful as it enabled them to understand the difference between various languages.
- Students understanding reflected a more global understanding of their linguistics lectures.

We turn now to the interpretation of the conceptions displayed by the students in their prior-experience of Studying Linguistics in terms of their inclusive relationship highlighting the features of the most and least sophisticated categories.

#### **4.1.1.5- Levels of the Prior-Conceptions**

The findings reported above revealed that the conceptions differed in terms of:

- Absence/presence of meaning in the information.
- Conception of knowledge as being problematic or non-problematic.
- Understanding of the purpose behind the acquired information.
- Students' perceived of their roles and those of their teacher.

These were the themes of expanding awareness which derived from the outcome space.

In conceptions A and B, we can notice that no or very little interest on the part of the students about the meaning of the information received in the classroom, the purpose of the lectures, or objectives of the course in general. The main concern of the students in these two conceptions was the

accumulation of information or increase in knowledge without necessarily questioning its meaning. This results in a 'surface' understanding of linguistics. In contrast to Conceptions A and B, Conceptions C and D the students were not merely interested in increasing the quantity of the linguistic information, but rather extracting meaning and obtaining a 'deep' understanding of the linguistics course objectives and knowledge (Marton et al, 1993; Biggs, 1994).

These findings confirm those of the study of Marton et al (1993) in which the distinction between advanced and less advanced conceptions of learning was made in relation to the absence or existence of meaning. Similarly, Biggs (1994) and Burnett et al (2003) identified two perspectives of learning: quantitative and qualitative, in which the key difference was found to be the students' ability to capture the meaning of the information acquired. According to Biggs (1994) the quantitative learning conception "is concerned with the accumulation of content", while the qualitative view "suggests that learning is about understanding and meaning-making through relating or connecting new material with prior-knowledge".

As far as the present study is concerned, it was found out that holders of the least sophisticated conceptions had an understanding that was rather fragmented (Ellis et al, 2007). The students in conceptions A and B, had difficulties to see the linguistic knowledge holistically (Lucas, 2010) and were unable to see how the information received in the course might relate to each other. The students in this level confined their studies to the accumulation of bits of information to be reproduced in the end of term examination Ellis et al (2007).

Furthermore, In conceptions A and B, the linguistic knowledge handled in their prior-experience is seen as non-problematic; it involved facts about historical information or information about language that can be retained as unrelated bits of information. According to Marton and Booth (1997),

conceiving knowledge in non-problematic way refers to the students' tendency to take knowledge for granted. It involves no or very little reflection on the nature of knowledge or the way it can be constructed (Marton and Booth, 1997; Paakkari et al, 2011). In contrast, in conceptions C and D, the students were aware of seeing linguistic knowledge as more than merely bits of facts and information. In Conception C, the students managed to see the importance of linguistic analysis thanks to their ability to relate between the information in various lectures on branches of linguistics. As shown in Chapter Three, the students established direct and clear connections between Linguistics and syntactic, semantic and morphological analysis. In Category D, the students showed an attempt to personally reflect over the way linguistic knowledge could be used to understand differences between various languages. In these two conceptions, knowledge

Following this discussion, the main distinction can be drawn between Conceptions A and B on the one hand, and C, D, on the other. In common with a number of studies on the students' experience of learning, the conceptions discussed above can be interpreted along two different levels: the lower level and the higher level. The level higher up in the hierarchy embraces the levels lower down the hierarchy. **The lower level** includes *Conception A (quantitative increase in knowledge)* and *Conception B (the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge about the English language)*, and **the higher level** includes *Conception C (understanding practical knowledge and analyzing languages)* and *Conception D (making sense of the linguistic information and critically reflect over languages)*.

Going deeper into the interpretation of these findings, we can say that the lower level conceptions in the present study are *fragmented* while the higher-level conceptions are *cohesive* (Marton et al, 1993). We are using Marton et al's (1993) terminology to refer to the levels of conceptions identified in the present study as they express the defining features of the

conceptions identified by Marton et al (1993), and which were later confirmed by Marton and Booth (1997), are the closest to the defining features of the conceptions in the present study. By fragmented conceptions, Marton et al (1993) refer to the conceptions that emphasize the accumulation, reproduction of pieces of information; while cohesive conceptions refer to the focus on building knowledge through understanding and relating.

Conceptions A and B are fragmented. Referentially, in these conceptions Linguistics is considered as an imposed subject of study, and conceived in terms of a few lectures randomly selected from the early experience of the linguistics course in the students' prior-experience. Structurally, Conception A doesn't suggest any awareness of meaning behind the linguistic knowledge, which is taken and retained as unrelated bits of information. Similarly, in conception B, the understanding of the linguistic information is slightly broader than that expressed in Conception; nevertheless, it remains limited and narrow in perspective.

Conversely, the cohesive conceptions C and D express a strong awareness of the purpose of the various pieces of information. The emphasis is on building and understanding behind the linguistic knowledge received in the course of linguistics. This is as far as the structural component is concerned. As for the referential component, we can say that the meaning component is preset in both conceptions, which is the main reason why they are considered higher-level conceptions. In conception C, there is a concern about questioning and relating the information acquired in the course. In conception D, in addition to the presence of meaning and relating component, there is a clear focus on a critical reflecting over the linguistic knowledge beyond what is transmitted by the teacher

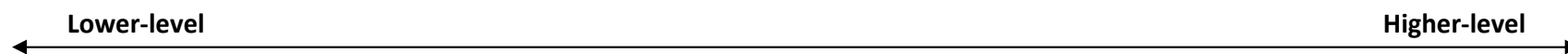
Levels and features of conceptions identified in the prior-experience of the study of linguistics are summarized in table (5.1). In terms of hierarchical and inclusive relationship, the conceptions higher up in the hierarchy

embrace those lower down the hierarchy. In the lower level, both conceptions A and B are about increasing knowledge and focus on one expected outcome of studying linguistics, which is obtaining the pass mark. Yet, conception B cannot be said to be as basic as conception A, since the emphasis extends that of conception A. In this latter, the focus is not even on linguistic information, but merely limited to historical and philosophical knowledge related to linguistics. In contrast to conception A, in conception B we can see the students' understanding of linguistics is not confined to only two or three lectures. Nevertheless, the understanding of linguistics knowledge and objectives remains limited in scope.



**Table 5. 1 : Levels and Features of the Study Conceptions in the Prior-experience of Studying Linguistics**

	Fragmented		Cohesive	
Category label	<b>Quantitative increase in knowledge about historical and philosophical study of language</b>	<b>Acquisition and accumulation of knowledge about the English language</b>	<b>Understanding Knowledge and Analyzing Languages</b>	<b>Critically Reflecting over Languages</b>
Referential aspect (what)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Linguistics is an external subject of study.</li> <li>- Its purpose is not clear.</li> <li>- Its content is limited to a few lectures.</li> <li>- Knowledge is useful to obtain the pass mark.</li> <li>- Knowledge is transmitted by the teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Linguistics is an external subject of study.</li> <li>- Its purpose is increase knowledge about the English language.</li> <li>- Knowledge is useful to develop awareness of how English functions.</li> <li>- Knowledge is transmitted by the teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Linguistics needs to be practically understood.</li> <li>- Its purpose is to develop practical information to analyze languages.</li> <li>- Knowledge is useful to analyze languages.</li> <li>- Knowledge is essentially constructed by the student.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Linguistics needs to be critically and personally understood.</li> <li>- Its purpose to develop critical reflection over languages.</li> <li>- Knowledge is useful to reflect over the way various language function</li> </ul>
Structural aspect (how)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No awareness of the meaning of the linguistic information.</li> <li>- Accumulating and retaining segregated pieces of information.</li> <li>- Relationship between information is not perceived.</li> <li>- Focus is vague and narrow.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information is meaningful in relation to the English language.</li> <li>- Acquiring and accumulating theoretical information about English.</li> <li>- Relationship between information is not perceived.</li> <li>- Focus is limited to acquisition of theoretical information about the English language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Practical information to analyze languages.</li> <li>- Understanding and developing the language analysis in different levels of linguistics.</li> <li>- Information cannot be retained unless it is related to each other within the course of Linguistics.</li> <li>- Focus is extended to various lectures about linguistic analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information needs be critically considered.</li> <li>- Developing personal understanding of the nature of various languages.</li> <li>- Essentially relating information within and beyond the course of Linguistics.</li> <li>- Focus on how the course could understood holistically.</li> </ul>



Taking into consideration the conceptions identified in previous phenomenographic studies, one might conclude that this conception can be placed between the 'quantitative increase in knowledge' and acquisition of practical knowledge and application' identified by researchers mentioned above. Despite the fact that the students referred to the potential usage of this knowledge in their studies, this conception cannot be said to be similar to Saljo's (1979) and Marton' (1994) application of knowledge.

Similarly, in the higher level, Conception D embraces conception C since in both conceptions importance is given to language analysis and reflection over the linguistic knowledge and how it may relate to each other, and do not confine the importance of linguistic knowledge exclusively to learning situations as is the case with Conception C. The students in the previous category experienced linguistics mainly about language analysis, but were not clear as to the way this information can be useful beyond learning situations. Therefore, understanding linguistics as a subject of study and understanding linguistic knowledge extends those expressed in all the previous conception. Understanding subjects of study and learning in this way is a characteristic of developed and sophisticated learning.

Now that we have discussed the inclusive relationship found in the prior-conceptions, we turn now to the prior-approaches to the study of Linguistics.

### **5.1.2- Prior- Approaches of Linguistics:**

This section considers our sub RQ B which is "*What prior-approaches do the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students hold about the study of Linguistics?*". In terms of study approaches in the students' prior-experience, the findings revealed three different ways of approaching the study of linguistics related to their prior-experience. These approaches were: **Approach A: Memorizing isolated pieces**

*of information with the intention to reproduce them in any future assessment; **Approach B:** Understanding and memorizing information with the intention to prepare for any future assessment; and **Approach C:** Understanding and relating various pieces of information with the intention to have a holistic understanding of the course.*

Biggs (1997) argued that the strategies employed by the students could be active or passive, teacher-focused or student-focused, emphasizing therefore the students' engagement in the learning activity. Earlier than Biggs' study, Marton and Saljo (1979) identified their widely cited findings in this field that yielded to two levels of approaches, surface and deep. According to them the learning or study approaches could be classified as either surface, this is the case of the students' who take are interested in the 'sign' that is the surface information instead of its meaning, and deep approach, where the students are interested in the signifier', that is to say the meaning of the message.

As far as the present study is concerned, there was no intention to replicate the widely adopted levels of study approaches, surface and deep, identified by Marton and Saljo (1979). This is because the analysis was inductive and the attempt was to go into the details of the activity employed by the students in their study of linguistics. This way any context-driven category could be taken into consideration. So, what approaches our students adopted in their prior-experience of studying Linguistics?

#### **5.1.2.1- Approach A: Memorizing Isolated Pieces of Information with the Intention to Reproduce them in any Future Assessment**

In this approach, studying linguistics means storing and retaining the information transmitted by the teacher in the lectures in order to be reproduced at the end of term exam. Memorizing pieces of information in this category might be preceded by summarizing and/or paraphrasing but is not

necessarily preceded by thoughtful questioning of the information or understanding. Similarly to the surface approach identified by Marton and Saljo (1979), a dominant feature in this approach is that the memorization of the information does not require understanding the knowledge it conveys. It is also not necessary to understand how the bits of information might relate to each other or how they might relate to the knowledge that the students have already acquired.

In this approach, the difficulty of memorizing without understanding is reduced by careful note-taking and paraphrasing the teacher's words. It is not necessary to go beyond the teacher's information since it is believed this is enough to obtain the pass mark. Being able to pass with minimum effort is the only intention expressed in this approach. The linguistic knowledge is not of interest to the students holding this approach and so memorizing what is believed to be necessary for the examination is the motive for studying Linguistics.

#### **5.1.2.2- Approach B: Understanding and Memorizing Information with the Intention to Prepare for any Future Assessment**

In this category, understanding is recognized as crucial in studying linguistics, along with memorizing. Understanding the materials and notes taken in the classroom is actually a prerequisite for a better retention of the linguistic information. Interestingly, these students expressed an interest in the linguistic information and acknowledged the importance of not only taking notes and summarizing them, but also making extra research outside of the classroom in order to comprehend the information transmitted by the teacher. In this case, the teacher is not the only and exclusive source of knowledge for the students expressing this approach.

Seeking understanding implies seeking meaning in the study of linguistics, and this reflected the students' active role in the learning process.

The information transmitted by the teacher had to be further developed by the students. In addition, seeking meaning behind the information received played a role in raising the students' interest in the linguistic knowledge, which makes this approach above approach A, where the students showed no or very little interest in the linguistic information, and appeared passive receivers of information, which for them was not required to be further developed.

One of the main strategies that made this approach significantly distinct from approach A is seeking cues in the teacher's explanations and materials. The students' strategies, such as note-taking, summarizing, and seeking information outside of the classroom, are also directed towards what they believe is going to increase their chances to obtain good grades in the end of term exam. In fact, this approach reflects the students' interest in the linguistic knowledge; it seems to be rather motivated by obtaining of the pass grade.

This approach is similar to the achieving or strategic approach identified by Biggs (1979) and Ramsden (1979) where his participants used effective study strategies such as good time management and organizing their work for highest possible grades. Yet, approach B identified in the present research seems to be closer to the seeking-cues approach identified in Lucas (1998) study, where the major strategy used was taking notes carefully, summarizing and improving them by further research outside of the classroom but at the same time expressed their main motive was to seek cues in the teacher's talk and materials to better prepare themselves for the exam. So, they showed a very high awareness of the assessment demands. Although the students in this approach showed an interest in understanding and extraction of meaning, their concern about assessment demands did not make this approach the most advanced one in the outcome space. A more advanced study approach was identified is discussed in the next section.

### **5.1.2.3- Approach C: Understanding and Relating Pieces of Information with the Intention to have a Holistic Understanding**

In this approach, the students emphasize understanding the linguistic knowledge and concepts acquired in the course through relating the information to each other. For these students, the best approach to study linguistics is to understand the course content as a whole, and so their main motive is to build up their own overview of the topics presented by the teacher. They also actively seek connections between the various lectures and pieces of information because understanding for these students can be achieved when connections between the different lectures is made. This approach focuses on understanding in the way identified by Nickerson (1985) and Entwistle and Entwistle (1992).

In the remaining part of this section, we shall focus in the interpretation of the findings just discussed in terms of inclusive relationship.

### **5.1.2.4- Levels of the Prior-Approaches:**

Three levels of prior-approaches arose from the above discussion: lower, higher and an intermediate, in which the difference is essentially related to more than one aspect including the students':

- perception of their own roles in the learning process,
- involvement in searching for meaning
- intentions,
- level of understanding, and
- the learning outcomes.

The findings revealed that the students' adopted approaches were mainly related to the students' perception of their own roles in the learning process, and the extent to which he/she is involved in searching for meaning and understanding the information (Biggs, 1997). Intentions were found out to be

another key element which makes a difference in the level of understanding and therefore the outcome of learning (Entwistle, 1997).

Furthermore, the difference between the lower level and higher level approaches in the present study is also made in relation to whether or not the knowledge acquired in the course was viewed holistically or in a fragmented way. The discussion above demonstrated that the students who are unable to relate the information acquired to what they already know, and those who view the information in an isolated and fragmented way, limited the study of linguistics to merely about memorization without understanding, and the outcome of learning to obtaining the pass grade. This was the case of approach A. In approach C however, it was necessary to appreciate the purpose of the information and understand what is beneath and beyond the surface meaning. It is also characterized by the students' constant effort to connect the information of the course to each other, and so the students with this approach manage to appreciate the course objectives and meaning holistically. Approach B represents an intermediate approach between A and B, where the students attempt to relate information to each other and achieve a deeper understanding, yet the objective is to be aware the teacher's objectives and to improve chances to obtain the highest possible grades.

The variation in the study approaches in the present study is in par with the findings of a number of studies reported in the phenomenographic literature. Approach A and C correlate with the findings of Pask's studies (1976, 1988) in which he reported that his participants used distinctively two different strategies which he termed serialist and holist. The difference between the two is related to the focus of the students and the outcome of learning (Pask: 1976, 1988). The students who used a serialist strategy focus on topics in isolation which does not lead them to make connections with related ideas and so fails to see analogies. The students applying the holist

strategy tend to focus on building up an overview of the topic and seek analogies and connections between ideas.

Approach B, however, was not identified by Pask (1976, 1988), the strategy is to organize understanding and seek connection between ideas in order to obtain high grades. This approach is close to the achieving or strategic approach identified by Biggs (1979) and Ramsden (1979). This approach is distinct mainly in relation to the students' intentions to obtain the highest possible grades by relying on understanding, organized study and awareness of assessment demands (Entwistle, 1998). Therefore, the difference between the present study and that of Pask (1976, 1988) is that the present study related the strategies to intentions, which makes variation in the study approaches close to the results of Biggs (1997) and Ramsden (1992).

In addition, the findings showed that the outcome the students might achieve is equally important in shaping the learning approach adopted, despite the fact that the outcome of learning was not particularly emphasized in Sge 1 of the study, since it focused on the prior-experience of learning; it came up as an important finding not to be overlooked. It was observed that the students whose intention was to reproduce the retained information in the end of term exam, had difficulty to cope with the course demands. The students holding this approach constantly complained about how 'complex', 'difficult', and 'boring' the information was in their prior-experience of studying linguistics. They also failed to understand the meaning and objectives of the course as they were merely interested in understanding the surface information transmitted by the teacher. However, the students whose intention was to actively obtain understanding of the course content became actively interested in the course content and were able to understand the way the various lectures of the course could be related to each other. This finding confirms Svensson's (1977, 1996). Results of a study on the students' learning



approaches, in which he was particularly interested in the learning outcomes. He found out that the students structure the knowledge in either a holist or atomist way (Svensson, *ibid*). The holist approach is higher and incorporates the atomist approach.

Summarizing all these findings, the identified approaches to the study of linguistics in the students' prior-experience can be presented in the table 5.2:

**Table 5.2 : Levels and Features of Prior-Approaches to studying Linguistics**

	Surface	Strategic	Deep
Category label	Memorizing and reproducing information	Understanding and memorizing knowledge	Understanding and relating the knowledge
Intention	Obtain the pass grade with minimum effort	Obtain highest grades possible	Understand and critically reflect over the course Information
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accumulating pieces of information in a fragmented way</li> <li>- Summarizing and memorizing facts without reflecting on their purpose</li> <li>- Relying on what the teacher transmits in the classroom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding ideas and information before any attempt to retain them.</li> <li>- Seeking cues in the teacher talk and materials about assessment demands</li> <li>- Organizing the workload and ideas for any assessment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relating the course information to each other.</li> <li>- Seeking understanding beyond the ideas presented.</li> <li>-</li> </ul>



As can be seen in table (4.5), the study approaches identified in the students' prior-experience to the study of linguistics includes the students' intention, strategy, and outcome. This latter was not part of the framework and was not a focus of the study right from the beginning. Yet, it emerged as a crucial finding that had to be emphasized. This is in line with Svensson's identification of the learning approaches, where both process (in the present study is referred to as strategy) and outcome are included. In addition to these two features, one cannot neglect the students' intention, a crucial feature identified by Marton and Saljo (1979).

**Table 5. 3: Prior-experience of Studying Linguistics**

Levels of approaches	Features of approaches
Lower-level	<p><b>Approach A: Memorizing and Reproducing</b>  <b>Intention: to obtain the pass grade</b>  <b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accumulating bits of information and ideas in a fragmented way.</li> <li>- Summarizing and memorizing facts without reflecting over their purpose.</li> <li>- Relying on what the teacher transmits in the classroom.</li> </ul> <p><b>Outcome:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty to cope with the workload.</li> <li>- Failure to make sense of information.</li> </ul>
Intermediate level	<p><b>Approach: Understanding and memorizing</b>  <b>Intention:</b> to obtain the highest possible grades  <b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding ideas and information before any attempt to retain them.</li> <li>- Seeking cues in the teachers' talk and materials about assessment demands.</li> <li>- Organizing the workload and ideas in preparation for any assessment.</li> </ul> <p><b>Outcome:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coping with the course demands</li> <li>- Becoming aware of the course objectives demands.</li> </ul>
Higher level	<p><b>Approach: Understanding and relating</b>  <b>Intention:</b> achieving a holistic and personal understanding  <b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seeking meaning in the information</li> <li>- Organizing and relating ideas to each other</li> </ul> <p><b>Outcome:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding the course objectives</li> <li>- Personally reconstructing knowledge</li> </ul>

Having answered our first research question, we shall turn to the discussion of the students' text-based conceptions of and approaches to studying Linguistics, which answers the second research question of this study.

## **5.2- Discussion and Interpretation of the Text-Based Experience Studying Linguistics:**

This section is devoted to the discussion of Sge 2 of the study that aimed at exploring the students' conceptions of studying Linguistics through classroom tasks and the approaches they adopted in this experience. The findings of this stage will enable us to answer the second research question that aimed at investigating the students' experience: *What learning experience do the students evoke in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?* The consideration of research question required answering two sub research questions formulated as follows: Sub RQ2 A "*What conceptions do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?*", and Sub RQ2 B "*What approaches do the students develop during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year course of Linguistics?*", both of which are answered in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 respectively.

Because this stage implied the use of classroom tasks, the framework that was used for both data collection and analysis in Sge 1 was slightly adapted to fit the objectives of Sge 2 of the study, as fully discussed in Chapter Three. The data were analyzed focusing on the variation in the students' quality of the summaries, the students' focus of attention and finally the students' intentions while dealing with the task of reading and summarizing linguistic academic texts. All of these aspects were brought together to form the outcome space in order to come out with categories of description for both the students' study conceptions and approaches. The findings of this stage of the study revealed a variation in the way the students conceived and

approached the study of linguistics, which will be discussed respectively in what follows.

### **5.2.1- Text-based Conceptions of Studying Linguistics:**

In attempt to answer our Sub RQ2 A, this section considers the learning conceptions developed by the students in their text.-based experience of studying Linguistics. Three conceptions emerged from the students' experience of tackling a reading and writing task in Linguistics; these were: **Conception A:** Linguistics as an externally imposed subject to be assessed; **Conception B:** Linguistics as looking for the 'hidden meaning'; and **Conception C:** Linguistics as personally reflecting over the linguistic knowledge. As in the Sge 1, the student's conceptions of studying linguistics in Sge 2 were identified following the framework set by Marton (1981) and Marton et al's (1997). Thus, these conceptions contain the 'what' and 'how' aspects. In the case of Sge 2, in the 'what' aspect we tried to identify what the linguistics means for the students based on the learning task, while the 'how' aspect specifies the structure of awareness expressed by the students.

#### **5.2.1.1- Conception A: Linguistics as an Externally Imposed Subject to be Assessed**

In this conception, the students distanced themselves from the learning materials. These latter were not considered as opportunities to develop their understanding of important linguistic concepts. They were rather conceived as imposed activities that had to be completed within the allotted time due mainly to the fact that they were unable to see the relevance of the tasks to their studies. The linguistic information triggered very little interest and engagement. The students however, seemed to be concerned with the possible impact their answers might have on their grades.

Referentially, this lack of relevance and engagement was reflected in the outcome which did not extend a reconstruction of the original text

through which the students used very basic summarizing techniques. The texts were also superficially understood and the summaries as the students did not engage in extracting its meaning nor relating the information within the text. As for the structure of awareness, the students did not pay attention to the meaning beyond the surface information transmitted by the author of the texts. Instead, the focus of their attention was on how to finish the task within the time allotted. It was not necessary to reflect over the meaning of the message transmitted by the author. Their effort was limited to copying and rewriting parts of the text in their own summaries. Linguistics for these students is non-problematic; its knowledge does not require reflection; it is conceived as an imposed subject that has to be studied mainly for assessment purposes.

A number of phenomenographers support this conclusion. Lucas (2000), for example, reported a similar conception of Accounting a non-problematic subject to be passed. The students depicted this lower-level category did not manage to perceive the immediate relevance of the accounting information and showed a lack of engagement with the course content. According to Lucas, this experience of Accounting was “detachment world”. In addition, the elements of the structure of awareness identified in this conception are similar to the ‘consumption metaphor’ mentioned by Marton and Saljo (1993) as an interesting finding in his study. The consumption metaphor refers to a set of activation, and not activities, performed by the students. This includes receiving, picking-up, and storing information which results in the accumulation of information in a fragmented way. Fragmented learning is considered as feature of the least complex conceptions of learning by a number of researchers, such as Saljo (1979), Biggs (1997), Boulton-Lewins et al (2004, 2008). Thus, the findings of the present study can be said to be confirming those reported in these studies. This was the least advanced conception. In what follows, we shall discuss Conceptions B and C, which are more inclusive conceptions.

### **5.2.1.2- Conception B: Linguistics as Looking for the Hidden Meaning:**

The students holding this conception conceive the linguistic learning tasks as opportunities to develop an understanding of the information acquired during the lectures. Understanding in this conception means grasping the information presented in the learning materials through seeking the 'hidden meaning' and 'relating' the various pieces of information transmitted in the learning material. It has been shown in the data analysis how one of the students explicitly used the phrase 'hidden meaning' to describe her focus of attention. These two features are salient of this conception, which made it well above conception A both structurally and referentially. Structurally, the students focused their attention on observing how the information in the learning material could be related to each other in order to understand the meaning intended by the author and the teacher as well. In this case, the students also showed their concern about assessment in this subject. However, unlike conception A, the linguistic learning materials were representing problematic knowledge that had to be sought by the student and not merely transmitted by the teacher. Referentially, the learning materials engaged them in the process of looking for the intended meaning of the texts, and in some cases the intention of the teacher in those tasks. They tried to constantly relate the information to each other within the texts and the content of the lecture. This led them to reflect over the purpose and meaning of the lectures through a careful consideration of the main concepts of these lectures.

In this discussion, we have shown how this conception interestingly more inclusive than conception A. However, the findings revealed another more complex conception, which is discussed in the next section.



### **5.2.1.3- Conception C: Linguistics as Personally Reflecting over the Linguistic Knowledge**

In this conception, the students considered the learning task to be an opportunity to construct knowledge through which they could re-examine the things encountered during not only on that particular lecture but also in the course in general. The students in this conception tend to focus their attention not only relating the information acquired in the course to each other but also to their personal experience and knowledge acquired beyond the course of linguistics.

Referentially, studying linguistics for the students holding this conception seemed to be conceived as a process of constructing knowledge based on what linguistic knowledge they had already acquired. The attention of the students focused mainly on relating the information studying in the course of Linguistics to each other in order to reach understanding of the texts. Structurally, the students set as they purpose understanding the linguistic information within and beyond the texts' limits. Understanding for these students knowledge construction through building newly acquired knowledge base on what has already been acquired in the course.

These students in this conception experienced linguistic information as relevant not only to their studies but also to their personal development. Linguistics is inherently meaningful that can be related to what one of the participants referred to as the 'real life'. Another student related the linguistic knowledge to her future interests as a future mother, and another one as a future teacher of English. In other world, the information about language acquisition, which was the theme of the lectures and the text, involved the students to raise question as to how children and/ or learners acquire languages.

In what follows is a deeper phenomenographic discussion of these conceptions in terms of inclusive relationship.

#### **5.2.1.4- Levels of Text-Based Conceptions of Studying Linguistics:**

Two sets of conceptions can be identified in Sge 2 of this study: lower-level and higher level conceptions. **The lower-level conceptions** includes: *Conception A*: Linguistics is an imposed subject to be assessed, which is mainly about receiving and reproducing knowledge; while **the higher-level conceptions** include two conception namely: *Conception B*: Linguistics as constructing knowledge Holistically, and *Conception C*: Linguistics as personally reflecting over the linguistic knowledge.

The conceptions derived from the task-based experience of studying linguistics showed a lot of similarity to those obtained in Sge 1; the students' conceptions in this stage can be distinguished in terms of the following themes of expanding awareness :

- Extraction of meaning.
- Relevance of the linguistic knowledge,
- Engagement o of the students
- Ability to relate information

This notion of meaning was found to be strong in previous phenomenographic studies. Ramsden (1992) distinguished between the two sets of categories and labeled them as “reproduction-oriented” and meaning – oriented” learning conceptions. A year later, Marton et al (1993) showed similarities and suggested a “reproductive”-“constructivist” conceptions; the distinction between the two sets in both studies was largely related to the students' ability to seek and understanding meaning in their learning experience.

In addition to the meaning notion, the idea of relating information received in various lectures to each other appeared to be another strong

feature that distinguished sophisticated conceptions B and C from the least sophisticated conception A. Relating was a key finding in the present study as the students' ability to relate bits of information resulted in advanced understanding of linguistics and linguistic knowledge as well as its objective. This is in line with the findings of a study carried out by Lucas (2000, 2001) who concluded that his participants' ability to relate pieces of information to each other led to a better understanding of learning of Accounting, and so resulted in more sophisticated learning conceptions. This finding also confirms Nickerson (1985: 234), who stated that:

It (understanding) requires the connecting of facts, the relating of newly acquired information to what is already known, the weaving of bits of knowledge into an integrated and cohesive whole. In short it requires not only having knowledge but also doing something with it.

As argued by Nickerson (*ibid*), the ability of relating facts and various ideas, or lectures to each other illustrates a higher-level of understanding knowledge. This is because it allows the student to adopt an integrated picture of the knowledge they receive which takes them to a higher level of conceiving learning.

In our investigation, the students holding conceptions B and C in Sge2 took this holistic view of Linguistics (Ellis, 2007). In conception B learning is centered on the concept of meaning and understanding. Studying linguistics is a personal activity and not an imposed one; Linguistics needs to be understood and meaning has to be sought, even when obtaining the pass grade is intended (Marton et al, 1993). Holders of conception C took a broader view of linguistics study trying to understand what is beyond the immediate classroom activity; unlike category C, conceived the linguistic tasks as providing a foundation on which they could build their own knowledge. This

conception is more sophisticated than conception B in that it centers around not only meaning and understanding, but also relating (Van Rossum, 1985). The students in this most sophisticated conception in this study “recognize the importance of relating newly acquired information to their prior personal experiences” (Marton and Booth: 1997, 37).

In conception A, the students, however did not seem to perceive the relevance of the linguistic tasks. They recognized little or no need to construct knowledge based on the classroom tasks which were simply needed to be performed following a static mechanically acquired steps with the intention complete the task. In Conception A experience of studying linguistics there is no need to seek meaning or relate bits of information. This leads us to talk about another factor shaping their conceptions: the students’ engagement in the learning task. This seems to be mainly the result of their interpretation of the task and the perception of their own roles in the learning process.

A complete picture of the student’s text-based experience of studying Linguistics cannot be fully achieved unless, their approaches are unveiled. Hence, the aim of the next section is the discussion and interpretation of the student’s adopted approaches.

### **5.2.2- Text-Based Approaches to Studying Linguistics:**

In an attempt to answer the second sub research question 2, the students’ ways of approaching the learning materials were identified in terms of the how the students performed the tasks and why they chose to perform it that way, both of which refer to their intentions and the focus of their attention both of which were related to what the students the learning outcomes. Based on this framework, three categories were identified: **Approach A**, reproducing the texts information with the intention to complete the tasks, **Approach B**: Reconstructing the message of the text with the intention to understand its hidden meaning, and **Approach C**: Personally reconstructing of the message

within and in relation to the whole course of Linguistics with the intention to construct a holistic knowledge of the linguistic knowledge. Each of these identified approaches are discussed in the rest of this section.

#### **5.2.2.1- Approach A: Reproducing the Texts Information with the Intention to Complete the Tasks**

In approaching the learning materials, the students in this category focused their attention on discrete information conveyed by the text. They emphasized details without questioning their relevance to the whole message of the texts. Therefore, understanding how these discrete details in isolation could be related to each other was not their priority. In addition, the learning material was approached as a detached activity; the students were not looking for any possible connections between the information set by the texts and that previously studied in the linguistics course. This focus of attention was observed in the summarizing strategies used by the students adopting this approach. The students relied mostly on merely rewriting the original text using less words so that they fit the quantity of the words usually implied in summaries. They relied exclusively on the text in producing their summaries; they did not rely on any background linguistic or personal knowledge about the main ideas of the texts. As already seen the analysis of data, the only prominent summarizing strategy was deletion. In other words the students' strategies were limited to the omission of certain information in order to simply and effortlessly rewrite the original text in a form of a summary.

Thus, in terms of intention, the students' objective was limited to completing the task with very little reflection over the message of the text. There was little focus on the processes or meaning of the text the objective of the task in general. This is because the learning materials were externally imposed activities which were not particularly important for their learning because they were not going to directly affect their grade in the module of Linguistics. The importance of any learning material of tasks was judged by it

direct relevance to the end of term examination and not by the knowledge it conveyed.

Using Marton and Saljo's (1976) terminology, this approach is surface: the referential aspect focuses on discrete ideas needed to write a summary involving no reflection or understanding. It also does not reveal any intention to seek feedback from the teacher or improve their understanding. This approach might also be identified as an atomistic approach (Svensson, 1977) because structural aspect is restricted to reading, mainly skimming through the text, decide about what to delete, and rewrite the text in a form of a summary. So given the structural and referential aspects, one might identify this approach as surface atomistic approach.

#### **5.2.2.2- Approach B: Reconstructing the Message of the Texts with the Intention to Understand its Hidden Meaning:**

In this category there is an inclination towards understanding the way the various text's details and ideas could be related to each other in order to achieve an understanding of the message of the text. The emphasis was on relational processes in dealing with the learning material using the inferences and selection instead of mere reproduction of the original text. The principle component of this approach was 'looking for the hidden meaning' (Marton, 1981; 1994) and 'relating facts to conclusion' (Fransson, 1977; Entwistle, 1988)

The students' intention was to uncover the message of the author of the text they were summarizing. They also showed an interest in understanding the teacher's concern with assessment demands. In contrast with the students in approach A, the students holding this approach tended to take understanding as the means to increase their chances for achieving the highest possible grades.

### **5.2.2.3- Approach C: Personally Reconstructing of the Message in Relation to the Course of Linguistics with the Intention to Construct a Holistic Linguistic knowledge:**

A few students were found to have not only explored the learning material in a deep sense, but also managed to organize their summaries different from the one presented in the text. Structurally, the students holding this approach engaged in extracting meaning, relating information found in the text to each other, and relating the various pieces of information acquired in the course with the intention to gain a deeper understanding of the learning material and the linguistics course in general. Referentially, this approach can be understood as using the linguistic tasks to achieve broad and holistic understanding of the acquired linguistic information.

In order to accurately answer Research question 2, it is crucial to interpret these findings in terms of inclusive relationship, which is the aim of our next section.

### **5.2.2.4- Levels of the Text -Based Experience Approaches of Studying Linguistics:**

In dealing with the learning tasks, the students varied between what Pask (1999) referred to a step-by-step and holistic learning strategy. In the step-by-step strategy, the students focus on information in isolation and emphasize details instead of the meaning behind those details. The outcome of this least sophisticated approach leads to failure of underhand connections between various piece of information and inability to seek analogies between the various ideas. The students who adopted a holistic learning strategy tended to seek understanding by relating information emphasizing therefore the global meaning of the information.

Within our investigation, we can observe a few but interestingly similar findings to Pask's (1999). The difference between the higher and lower levels approaches was found to be directly related to the way the students interacted with the learning materials. As shown in table (5.2), the difference is one between merely deleting randomly selected parts of the text to be summarized and rewrite following exactly the same order of the original text, compared to reflecting over the most relevant parts and reconstructing the message of the text in a personal way. The crucial difference between the approaches lies in the ability of the students to explore the task; i.e., to consider it as an opportunity to relate various pieces of information with the intention to understand knowledge beyond the information conveyed in the learning materials. Using the meaning inherent in the learning material to reach knowledge beyond that transmitted in the text. This way of exploring classroom learning materials is rather deep in nature.

Compared to the findings of the previous phenomenographic investigations, the present findings of the Sge 2 are closer to that of Svensson (1996) who was interested not only in the adopted approaches but also their relationship with the learning outcome; that is to say the process of learning and the nature of the outcome of learning.

What the learning conceptions of and approaches in both the prior-experience and text-based experience of studying Linguistics tell us about the nature of Linguistics study is what we will be discussing in the next section.



**Table 5. 4 : Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics**

Levels of approaches	Features of approaches
Lower-level	<p><b>Approach A: Reproducing to complete the tasks</b></p> <p>Intention: to finish the task within the time limits with minimum reading and summarizing strategies.</p> <p>Strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accumulating bits of information and ideas in a fragmented way.</li> <li>- Summarizing and reproducing disconnected details without reflecting over their purpose.</li> <li>- Relying exclusively on the texts in hands to tackle a learning material.</li> </ul> <p>Outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Production of unsatisfactory summaries.</li> <li>- Difficulty to see the relevance of the linguistic information to their studies of Linguistics.</li> <li>- Failure to make sense of information.</li> </ul>

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**Approach B: Reconstructing to understand the hidden meaning**

Intention: to obtain the highest possible grades

Strategy:

- Understanding ideas and information before any attempt to retain them.
- Seeking cues in the teachers' talk and materials about assessment demands.
- Relating the various ideas of the learning material to achieve an understanding.

Outcome:

- Producing summaries that reflected the authors' main ideas.
- Developing an understanding of the main concepts introduced learning materials.

**Approach C: Reconstructing to achieve a holistic understanding of the Course of Linguistics**

Intention: Achieving a holistic and personal understanding

Strategy:

- Seeking meaning in the information
- Organizing and relating ideas to each other the already acquired linguistic knowledge within the learning materials.
- Organizing and relating ideas in relation to the already acquired linguistic knowledge.

Outcome:

- Reconstructing the texts in meaningful summaries that reflect the students' personal understanding.
  - Understanding the course objectives.
  - Personally reconstructing knowledge.
-

### **5.3- Nature of the Study of Linguistics:**

What do the findings in both Sge 1 and Sge 2 tell us about the nature of the study of Linguistics? How is Linguistics experienced in the context of this investigation? These are crucial questions in any phenomenographic study and actually one of the main objectives set at the outset of this investigation. Our third research question, which was designed to meet this objective, is going to be addressed in this section.

The experience of 40 undergraduate students during six months revealed that the conceptions of studying Linguistics were more complex than initially anticipated. They were also context-driven since this study provides evidence about a number of crucial contextual factors which significantly marked the linguistics study experience. The nature of Linguistics from a phenomenographic perspective can be understood based to themes of expanding awareness in the participants' experience. This is because; the themes emerging from the discussion of the findings are contextually related.

The findings of Sge 1 revealed four different ways of conceiving the study of linguistics and three different ways of approaching its study, and so in terms of number of categories, the study conceptions and approaches expressed by the students do not correlate. Because the method of data analysis was inductive, it was not possible to predict the number of categories of conceptions for both conceptions and approaches in the students' prior-experience of studying linguistics. Therefore, there was no attempt to make the number of the categories of description of conceptions correlate. However, the interpretation of the findings in terms of levels, as well as a consideration of the themes that emerged from the students' written accounts and interviews made the correlation easier to depict. In addition, the students were allocated in terms of conceptions and approaches, as shown Chapters Three, helped to see clear correlation between the way the students conceived and approached the study of Linguistics.

In Sge2, however, there was a clear correlation between the conceptions and the approaches adopted by the students. At the lower-level, we find Conception A and Approach A adopted by the students in dealing with the classroom task. At the higher-level, there are two conceptions and two approaches, both of which reflected a deeper and meaningful experience of studying Linguistics.

The first observation we can obtain from findings is that the majority of the students were allocated in the lower-level prior-experience of learning: 27 students showed a surface approach to studying Linguistics, 8 students expressed a rather intermediate strategic approach. As for the prior-conceptions, we allocated 13 students conceiving the study of Linguistics in a fragmented way and only 9 in the cohesive higher level conception of Linguistics. The second observation is the correlation between the student's adopted approaches and conceptions. The students who adopted a lower-level prior approach also tended to conceive linguistics in a less sophisticated way. However, a few but interesting exceptions were noted in relation to the prior-experience of S6, S12, S22, and S28. These students adopted lower-level approaches but a higher-level conception. Such an experience in phenomenography is not uncommon, students might hold a sophisticated conception but adopt a surface approach in a given context, this is due to the fact that conceptions are stable and change over time while approaches are adapted according to the learning situation (Marton and Saljo, 1993; Entwistle, 1997).

In order to interpret these findings deeper, it is crucial to take into consideration the context of the present investigation. The prior-experience of studying Linguistics took place at the beginning of the academic year; a period of transition to a different academic year and level of knowledge. It can be said that it was expected at this initial stage of the investigation that the students recognize little need to construct or relate information. However, in the

closing stage of this investigation, the conceptual understanding of Linguistics was expected to take place; however, this was not the case. There were exceptions observed in the experience of a few students that witnessed a fundamentally deep and cohesive experience of studying Linguistics.

As for the text-based experience of studying Linguistics, we can observe findings close to those obtained in Sge1: more than half of the participants adopted a lower-level text-based experience of Linguistics. Linguistics was conceived linguistics as imposed subject of study in which knowledge is non-problematic. The learning materials were approached in a surface atomistic way as the attention was focused mainly on discrete and not necessarily significant details in the linguistic texts. Consequently, the students failed to understand the meaning of the texts. They also did not manage to make sense of the linguistic information. Conversely, a few students evoked a meaningful text-based experience of Linguistics. They were interested in unveiling the hidden meaning that the author wanted to convey, approaching therefore the learning materials in a deeper holistic way. The attention of these students was on relating the texts' ideas with the intention to achieve an understanding of the message of the text as whole. Other students went deeper than this and focused their attention on relating the lectures' information to those studied within the course of Linguistics. Their intention was essentially constructing a personal understanding of the course information.

Similar conceptions were found in Lucas' (2000) phenomenographic study in which he referred to two sets of learning experiences. The first represents the lower-level experience of learning which he referred to as "the experience of Detachment" (Lucas, 2000: 487). In this learning experience, Accounting was conceived as a problematic subject that lacks relevance; it was merely a subject to be passed. The second one is an "engagement experience" (Lucas, *ibid*), in which the students see a value in relating

information and conceive knowledge as inherently possessing meaning that has to be sought.

Hence, the picture that emerges of the nature of the experience of studying Linguistics was found to be related to three different experiences:

- ***Linguistics as an imposed subject to be assessed.***
- ***Linguistics as an inherently meaningful subject.***
- ***Linguistics as involving personal and critical reflection.***

Linguistics was experienced by the majority of the students as a subject to be assessed. This need to obtain the pass grade revealed an experience of Linguistics as non-problematic in which the linguistics information is retained and reproduced only in assessment occasions. The linguistic information is not perceived as meaningful. The students did not actively engage in the learning materials relying mostly on the teacher to provide the information, which for in this experience, is important only to pass the subject. This might reveal that when Linguistics is experienced as a subject to be passed, learning is very much teacher dependent and syllabus-bound (Svensson, 1999); learning is an external activity, imposed by an authority. The Linguistic information is therefore not personally relevant to students holding this view, and this is why there is no attempt to evaluate information; it is simply accumulated and reproduced to meet assessment demands. The students expressed confusion as to the purpose of studying Linguistics

Conversely, Linguistics was also inherently meaningful for a few students, who experienced Linguistics by constantly reflecting over the meaning inherent in the Linguistic information. Consequently, understanding and relating different pieces of linguistic information becomes crucial studying Linguistics. The students were engaged in extracting meaning from the learning materials with the intention to develop a complete understanding of every theme in the course of Linguistics. Knowledge received in Linguistics

is therefore problematic. However, understanding for in this experience did not seem to be an end but a means to achieve the highest possible grades. This might be close to the 'cue-seekers' identified in Entwistle's (1997) study, who reported some participants that adopted deep approached to their studies with the intention to seek-cues in the course that might enable them to obtain very distinguished results in their exams.

In addition, assessment seems to have played a crucial role in shaping the nature of Linguistics. Concerns about the pass grade are prominent in the experience of the majority of the students, even in the second stage where the learning materials were designed in a way that would appeal higher order thinking. This raises the question on a probable connection that could be discerned between the approaches held by the students and the curriculum objectives as a whole. In other words, are the courses we are designing and the teaching approaches directly or indirectly encouraging the students to adopt surface or strategic learning approaches? This question was not directly addressed in the present study, but the evidence obtained throughout this investigation raises this issue which deserves a further investigation.

Interestingly, a few students revealed an alternative way of experiencing Linguistics; studying linguistics is a personal meaning-making process, which involves critical consideration of the information received in the course of Linguistics as a whole. The students experienced freedom in exploration of the information relating it not only to the previously acquired knowledge about languages, but more interestingly to their personal 'real world' experience. Raising questions about languages and linguistic information in their personal experience was also interestingly revealed. The tasks were regarded as opportunities to increase their awareness of the world of language. Knowledge is therefore essentially self-constructed.

Building on the discussion of the findings, the following section explores the pedagogical implications derived from the study, highlighting their relevance for both educational practice and research.

#### **5.4- Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations:**

The present phenomenographic investigation is concerned with informing the practice of teaching, learning and researching in context of higher education. In line with phenomenographic research literature reviewed in Chapter One, the findings of this phenomenographic research are significant in the way that they could contribute higher education pedagogy in general and in the context of the present study in particular (Ramsden, 2013). The implications of the present study are a set of principles and practical pedagogical recommendations that are hoped to help not only the teachers of Linguistics but also other subjects in the context of our study. In the light of the findings discussed so far, the following principles need to be highlighted if the quality of the students' experience of learning is considered as crucial in the undergraduate level:

The first principle implied by the findings of this research is recognizing the students' conceptions and accounts of their own experiences as a key in developing the courses in English studies. As has already been argued in the discussion of the findings, the students' ways of experiencing learning in the course of Linguistics played a crucial and direct role in the quality of their outcomes. It was even a striking finding in Sge 2 of the study where the materials were approached in a superficial way by the majority of the participants. This finding confirms Ellis et al's (2007), Cope and Prosser' argument (2005) that learning is affected by the students' conceptions of the nature of knowledge and the nature of the subject of study more than what the teacher prepares. From a phenomenographic perspective, it is recommended that the teachers be aware of the variation of approaches and conceptions of Linguistics at the beginning of the course as well as the



approaches their students display when they try to make sense of the course content. In line with the views of Prosser and Trigwell (1999) this may help identifying any lower-level conceptions so that the teachers are able to design their lectures in a way that addresses the students' understanding and not the teachers' own perspective. However, we should be careful not to deal with these conceptions and approaches as 'misconceptions' that need to be rejected or corrected, as noted by Lucas (2000: 499) the students' prior-conception "*should be 're-viewed' and regarded, not as irrational, unreasonable or something to be 'overcome' but as something to be acknowledged' within the classroom*". Instead, such awareness encourages the teacher to design their materials based on concrete and accurate information about their students and not based on broadly identified curriculum objectives. According to Paakkari et al (2011), it also encourages the teachers to enter into dialogues with their students about their current conceptions and the other available conceptions that if adopted, their learning will qualitatively improve.

It is also recommended to communicate the learning conceptions to the students to raise their awareness about the level of their conceptual understanding and provide them with other possible ways of understanding the nature of knowledge, learning, or Linguistics as an academic subject; this can also help the students to set objectives for their learning beyond the pass grade. In addition, as argued by Cope and Prosser (2005), the identification of the students' conceptions and approaches in hierarchical way help considering the students' development in terms of qualitative learning outcomes instead of marks.

In addition, having considered the quality of the learning outcomes, one of the findings that emerged from this study is that effective learning has to be considered as a 'conceptual change' instead of 'increase in knowledge'. This appeal for a change in the teachers' attitudes towards the way they design effective lectures and learning materials, especially that, as argued throughout

this dissertation, learning does not take place independently from teaching. In other words, if teachers hold the conception that teaching is mainly about transmitting knowledge and covering the course content, then one can expect learning to be conceived as an increase in and reproduction of knowledge (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Biggs and Tang, 2011). Hence, the teachers are invited to engage into a teaching process that might lead to a students' conceptual change and encourage deep study approaches.

This implies the need for lecturers to engage in systematic action research from phenomenographic perspective. While investigating the students learning experience help identifying insights about various ways of conceiving and approaching learning; yet, the teacher's actions within their classroom is much more significant in education.

All of these key principles implied by the findings of the present research that can be applicable to the teaching and learning of Linguistics, but might also inspire lecturers of other university subjects. Thus, they could be taken as a model for teaching university subjects in the context of our study readily adaptable. They are also hoped to raise the teachers' awareness to consider teaching their subjects from a phenomenographic social-constructivist perspective. This can be practically achieved through reflective teaching, as suggested by Ramsden (2003), Biggs (2003) Biggs and Tang (2011), among other phenomenographers. Biggs and Tang (2011: 41) strongly argued that:

Wise and effective teaching is not, however, simply a matter of applying general principles of teaching according to rule; they need adapting to each personal strengths and teaching context (...) Expert teachers continually reflect on how they might teach even better.

Reflective teaching should be encouraged as it involves changing teaching systematically. Indeed, Biggs and Tang (ibid, 43) suggested the term 'transformative reflection' that enables the transformations from the unsatisfactory 'what-is' to the more effective 'what might-be'. Transformative reflection requires reflection over the learning and teaching experiences based on constructive and phenomenographic guidelines. Below, a number of practical steps are recommended for lecturers to be readily applicable and adaptable to the academic disciplines they are teaching. These are inspired from Biggs' (1997) Biggs and Tang's (2011) Constructive alignment theory for effective teaching and learning, which is based on the constructivist theory that knowledge is constructed by the learners. Based on my experience with constructivist-phenomenographic teaching as a teacher-researcher, a few adaptations were made to this model so as to fit our context of teaching. Hence, five steps are recommended for teaching from a phenomenographic-constructivist perspective:

***Step 1: Developing awareness of the teachers' own teaching and learning conceptions within the subject they are teaching:***

The first step in designing effective teaching learning of Linguistics is to be aware of the conceptions that the teachers hold about teaching and learning Linguistics. Before designing any lectures, materials, or evaluation techniques, it is crucial for teachers to develop an awareness of their own conceptions of teaching and learning. This is because; teachers cannot expect their students to develop sophisticated learning conceptions and deep approaches if they hold conceptions that encourage surface approach and lower-level conceptions of the subject. Developing awareness of teachers' teaching conceptions and approaches implies increasing their knowledge about the phenomenographic research and literature background. Despite the fact that to the theoretical background provided in Chapter One focuses on the student's learning experience, it also provides an essential background for

educationalists who wish to start teaching from a constructive phenomenographic point of view. In addition, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) Entwistle (1997) Biggs (1997), and Kember (1999) provide interesting and comprehensive discussion of the main studies on the students' and teachers' learning and teaching experience. Practically speaking, the following tasks are suggested for the teachers to highlight their teaching and learning approaches.

**Task 1: Developing awareness of teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning**

Think of one of your typical lectures, and then:

(1) Describe the way you go about presenting the knowledge in the classroom.

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(2) What is your intention behind what you do? (how you teach the linguistic course content)

What you do	Your intention
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.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....

(3)- State what you emphasize in your lectures in terms of content, information, learning skills, language skills, learning materials (i.e., what you actually teach)

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The first task is simple, but deep in its purpose and impact; as the teacher voices their thoughts and make explicit his teaching approach and conception following the what/how framework discussed in Chapter Two and used in exploring the data in chapters Three and Four. The ‘what’ dimension, represented in section 1 and 3 in task 1 helps clarify the conceptions; while the ‘how’ dimension is represented in section 2. This task is not an end in itself; teachers need to reflect over their teaching to develop awareness of whether their teaching encourages deep or surface learning in order to decide about the actions to take in order to encourage deep learning approach in his students. The review of the literature of this dissertation may provide some helpful background to know about the kind of tasks and actions that appeal to a deep learning approach and those that may lead to adopt a surface approach. This is the object of task 2, adapted from Biggs and Tang (2011: 28).

**Task 2: Actions to encourage deep learning**

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As for the way these tasks can be explored, teachers are invited to use the frameworks discussed in Chapter Two and Three, which were adapted from phenomenographic studies and applied in the present investigation. Following the structural (what) and referential (why) aspects help exploring the data in a less complicated way than one might expect.

***Step 2: Developing an awareness of the students' prior-conceptions and prior-approaches***

Information about the students' prior-experience could best be drawn from conversations or class discussion about the major concepts of the subject-matter. In the beginning of the course, a small number of randomly selected students can be selected to initiate a discussion with the intention to identify their conceptions of the intended subject. A writing task can also be helpful as observed in the present study in Sge 1; the task used contained a single question and yet was able to generate interesting and unexpectedly complex variation.

Reflections on the outcomes of the students' class activities will also be an interesting source of useful information for the lecturers. It has been shown in the present study how one classroom activity like summarizing a linguistic

text could reflect the students' approaches to linguistics learning; the subjects in this study have chosen to engage or detach themselves from the activity evoking various conceptions of the learning materials. Thus, such activities could be involved in the teaching practices with the intention to reveal ideas and views from the student. This could enable the teacher to identify any misconceptions that need to be properly remediated.

### ***Step 3: Setting the intended learning outcomes***

The next step is to clarify what the students should be able to do by the end of a unit of teaching. In other words, specifying what the students will be able to do as well as the learning activities to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang, 2011, Light and Cox, 2001; Ramsden, 2003). Traditionally, teachers follow pre-set curriculum objectives specifying what the teacher has to teach. Curriculum objectives are usually set in terms of what the student is expected to 'understand'; they are commonly written using verbs like 'to understand', 'comprehend', 'developing and understanding'. According to Biggs and Tang (2011: 71) "*teachers have to specify what 'understanding means' 'what activities are involved and what level of understanding are the students to achieve?'*". Biggs (1997) and Biggs and Tang (2011) suggested writing intended learning outcomes using verbs that can show what is exactly intended to achieve in terms what the student will be able to do. They (ibid) suggested using verbs such as 'explain why', 'explain how', 'explain what', 'reflect on', 'evaluate', and 'analyze'. Writing the intended learning outcomes instead of teaching objectives will make it easier for the teachers to decide about the kind of learning tasks to be used.

### ***Step 4: Designing learning materials***

Setting the Intended learning outcomes instead of course objectives enables the lecturers to design learning tasks and refine the content of their courses in a much grounded and learner-oriented way. From the phenomenographic

point of view, teachers' priority is to design lectures that engage the students in deep study approaches. A deep approach is enhanced through teaching when it is based on informed decisions; hence, the previous steps are crucial in making sound decisions about what and how to teach. According to phenomenographic research, a deep approach builds on the students' prior-knowledge and addressing the students' misconceptions. (Marton and Saljo, 1993; Entwistle, 1997). It also involves teaching in a way that shows the underlying structure of what is to be learnt.

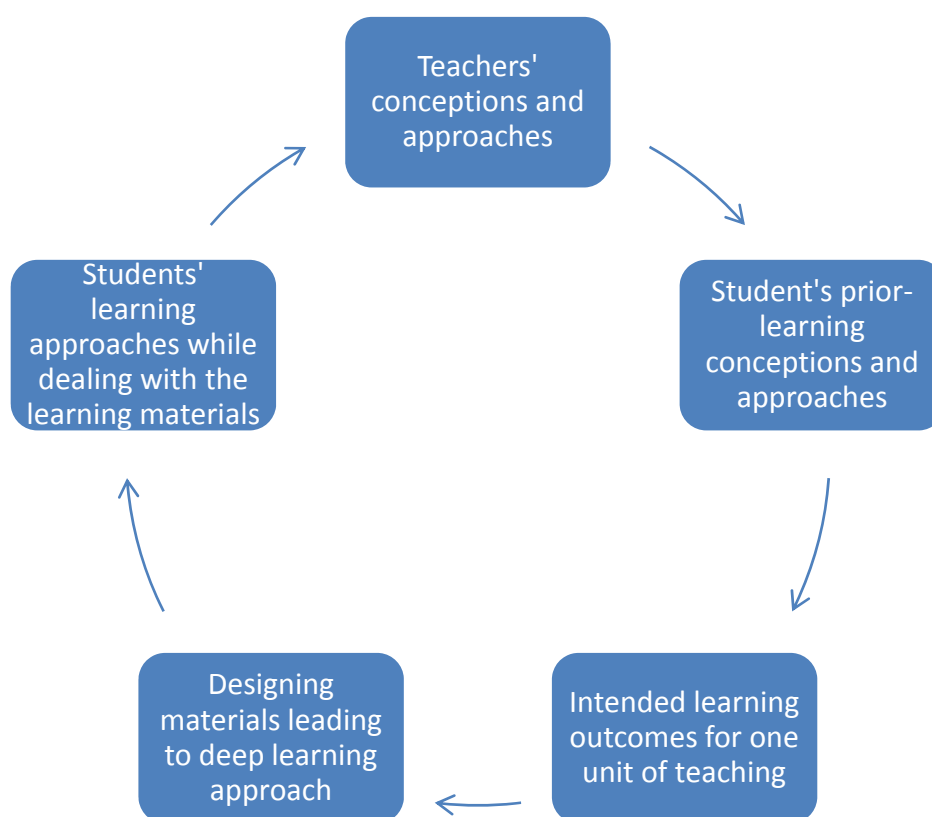
***Step 5: Reflecting over the students' adopted approaches in the classroom***

One of the main principles of social-constructivist theory is that "*what the student does is more important in determining what is learnt than what the teacher does*" (Shuell, 1986: 426). Given this argument, a teacher's role does not stop in preparing and presenting lectures; they need to reflect over the experiences taking place in their classrooms as part of their transformational reflection and consider what might be taken for granted and go unnoticed when they are teaching. It was observed in Sge 2 of our study that the students' approached a task in an unexpectedly varied way. The tasks were designed with the intention to enhance deep thinking over meaning and relating ideas to each other; and yet, we have reported how the majority of the students approached the task in a surface way. This seems to confirm a recurrent finding in phenomenographic investigation on students learning "*is that we can never assume that the impact of teaching on student learning is what we expect it to be*" (Ramsden, 2003: 8). Engaging the students in expressing their thoughts about the learning materials and tasks and trying to collect information about the way they went about performing a task is going to provide the teachers with a lot of insightful information about the way their lectures are conceived and approached. Teachers will therefore make any improvement in their teaching based on the information collected in real classroom interaction.



As illustrated in the figure below, these steps should be regarded as a cyclical process and integrated part of lecturer's teaching. It involves continuous and systematic reflection. It also brings into question a reconsideration of the relationship of teaching, researching and learning. This is to be considered in the next section.

**Figure 5.1 : Teaching Linguistics from a Phenomenographic Social-Constructivist Perspective**



### **5.5- Contribution to Higher Education:**

There are three major contributions of this study to higher education:

- (1) It contextualizes the diversity of the students' learning conceptions and approaches in a learning experience within an academic discipline in Algerian University.

- (2) It highlights the effect that a learning conception and approaches can have on the learning outcomes.
- (3) It raises the educationalists' awareness of the need to systematically consider their students' learning conceptions and approaches as part of their pedagogic practice.

The study value lies first in highlighting and addressing the lack of research on students learning in the Algerian context. This study confirms a number of findings in contexts different from ours, leading us to argue that conceptions of learning are close in essence across different disciplines, cultural and geographical contexts. Differences lie in the themes of expanding awareness emerging from the students' learning experience. The various categories of description can be taken as a starting point for lecturers of other subjects, such as content-modules, including literature and civilization, and/or disciplines to explore the learning experience.

Moreover, this investigation involved us in a number of adaptations of phenomenographic Western models to fit the context of the present study, where the phenomenographic social-constructive models are still sadly neglected. These adaptations can be readily used essentially by lecturers of Linguistics, but also teachers of content subjects, where the contextual factors are closer to the context of the present study. They might be helpful to uncover the students learning conceptions and approaches in their respective disciplines, especially given the diversity of the students' learning conceptions and approaches to study Linguistics.

In addition, the diversity in students' learning conceptions and approaches also pointed out that learning outcomes should not be seen as resulting merely and exclusively from the students' misunderstanding of the course content presented by the teacher; it rather suggests that the reasons lie deeper in the learning conceptions and approaches that the students hold in

that leaning situation. Therefore, as noted earlier in this chapter, if a qualitative change is sought in students' learning, then educationalists need to seriously take into consideration the students' conceptual change within various disciplines.

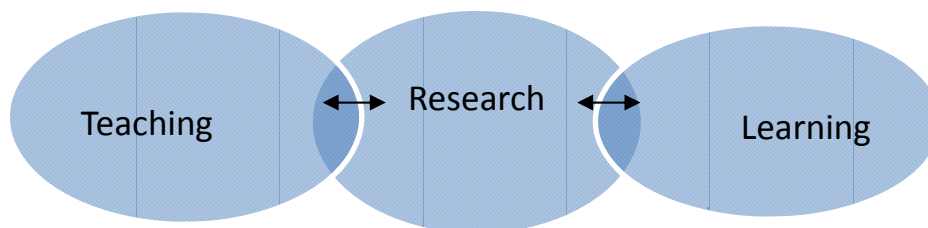
This is also hoped to encourage the educationalists to incorporate phenomenography as part of their teaching. Said differently, teaching should not be perceived as related only to the task of preparing, specifying course objectives, presenting and evaluating lectures, and assessing the students; it is also essentially related to research. This latter invites teachers to take a different look at teaching in higher education, and its relationship to learning and researching, seeking a constructive dialogue between not only teaching and learning, but also research. Indeed, my experience as a phenomenographer brought me into close relation with the 'world' of learning both as a teacher and a researcher. I was becoming increasingly aware of how distant I have been from the worlds of teaching and learning in my earlier experience as an academic. This is mainly due to the fact that traditionally, growing as an academic researcher implies distancing oneself from teaching and learning; effort, time and concentration has to be given to research and scholarship (Boyer, 1990; Kember 1997). Teaching is commonly perceived as a task that *"both distracts from the time and effort available to put into research and often contributes to a reduction in the status of the academic"* (Light and Cox, 2001: 33). In other words, the relationship between teaching and researching is usually exclusive. i.e., *"one practice is achieved (in terms of time and status) that the expense of the other practice"* (Biggs, 2003: 35). This view of teaching commonly adopted by professional researchers often implies a distance from teaching and learning. It reflects a rather linear and imbalanced relationship between teaching, researching and learning (Biggs, 2003).

Consequently, the practice of one is achieved at the expense of the other because the relationship between teaching and research is perceived as linear involving two detached and distinct practices. Commenting on this linear model of teaching and research relationship, Light and Cox (2001: 36) noted that:

Professionalism in this model has traditionally tilted towards research, often with negative effect for teaching. Thus, for many academics, one of the essential measures of a more advanced level of professionalism is the distance from teaching responsibilities (particularly at the undergraduate level) and from students. Indeed, time spent on teaching –doing it, conceptualizing, developing it, and so on- has frequently been regarded as distinctly unprofessional.

The present investigation encourages the view of academic practice as incorporating three worlds, where research is mediating between the two worlds of teaching and learning as shown in the figure below:

**Figure 5.2: Relationship between the Three Worlds of Teaching, Research and Learning, Based on Light and Cox's model (2001, 35)**



This figure illustrates an alternative model originally suggested by phenomenographers including Bennet (1998) Boyer (1990) Light and Cox

(2001), and Ramsden (2003). This model is relational and integrates three worlds of teaching learning and researching as part of the academic practice (Light and Cox: 2001).

Relating this to the pedagogical suggestions implied by this study, in order to incorporate phenomenography in the teaching practice as part of transformational reflection, the three worlds of teaching, learning and researching are naturally brought together. It is research into students learning firmly embedded in disciplines that is likely to bring about a qualitative change in the learning and teaching situation. This way of conceptualizing teaching–research–learning relationship has completely changed my own vision of my status as a teacher-researcher. This might be summarized in this strong statement by Ramsden (2003, 8) :*“university teaching unaccompanied by study and research is of limited value. This interdependence of research and teaching is a foundation stone of higher education”*.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter, we have discussed the findings of the study with relevance to the context of the research and taking into consideration the research background for this study. The main focus was laid on answering the research questions. To this aim, we gradually moved from the categories of description identified in the previous chapters to a broader discussion embedded in the phenomenographic research literature. The discussion of the categories of description in this chapter encompassed both conceptions and approaches to learning identified in both stages of this study. This Chapter also involved an interpretation within the context of the study and in relation to the most widely reported findings found in the literature.

It was revealed that the students' experience of studying Linguistics could be interpreted along two distinct sets of categories: the lower-level and higher-level. The discussion in this chapter has given us a clearer understanding of the main characteristics of what the experience of learning involves in the context of the course of Linguistics. The image that we have been able to identify from the findings of this study could be summarized in the following:

- The students enter a new learning situation with a set of conceptions.
- The students assess the task demands.
- The students take into consideration the assessment and evaluation demands.
- The students engage in the learning task with certain intentions.
- The students unconsciously select an appropriate approach in harmony with the conception he/she holds about the learning activity, material, or subject-matter.
- The students adjust their approaches to the demands of the task and the evaluation in his learning situation.

Based on these findings, pedagogical implications were highlighted along with practical suggestions.

# **General Conclusion**

## **General Conclusion**

### **1- Review of the Key Findings:**

The present research was designed to achieve two main objectives: first to explore the conceptions and approaches displayed by the students when it comes to learning Linguistics in higher education level. Second, to obtain an understanding about the nature of the leaning experience of undergraduate students. To achieve these goals, the students' accounts and responses were considered using a phenomenographic design of research. Thus the experience of learning was mapped out into a set of descriptive categories that account for the variation in the students' ways of conceiving and approaching linguistics learning. Moreover, this investigation did not involve any direct intervention on the part of the researcher to affect the students' experience; instead the whole research was carried out in natural learning situations. Thus, using the category-based system framework to guide the data analysis, the findings revealed a set of categories that reflected the qualitative nature of the data. A summary of the key findings is provided in what follows:

- The findings emerging for this study suggested that the majority of the students conceived 2<sup>nd</sup> year linguistics learning as an increase in knowledge. This appeared to be related to the reproduction approach adopted by the majority of the students. It has been argued that was linked to a crucial contextual feature which is the perception of relevance of the subject. It was shown that the majority of the students failed to perceive the relevance of linguistics for their studies of English and their future career. Related to this lower-level conception of Linguistics is the lack of interest in the content of the subject. These



features that emerged from the students' accounts of their experiences in both stages of the study might have led the students to focus attention on discrete information which they perceived as necessarily to pass. Thus, because Linguistics course content including the linguistic materials were perceived as being imposed, the students tended to distance themselves from linguistics learning and tackle the subject in a passive and less engaged way.

- This study demonstrated that a few students adopted conceptions of Linguistics as being meaningful and relevant. These students were distinguished from the rest of the students adopting a different learning conception mainly because of their intentions to search for meaning. Their tendency to seek meaning was apparent in their efforts to relate the knowledge they have been receiving to each other, to that which they brought to the classroom, to their personal experiences. In addition, the features that characterized these meaning-seekers were that they construct their own knowledge in a personal way, and their interest in the content of the subject and materials.
- Results suggested that the majority of the students come to the second year study experience with a highly syllabus-bound conception of Linguistics. Consequently, the students have demonstrated difficulties in developing a clear understanding of what Linguistics might mean beyond assessment demands imposed by the curriculum. The prior-conceptions of most of the students were mostly lower-level, reflecting a lack of relevance attributed to Linguistics. It has been illustrated how the students in the beginning of the study confused Linguistics as scientific subject with philosophy and history. Here, the students identified Linguistics in relation to discrete themes picked up from their first year course of Linguistics. This tendency to focus on

segregated lectures or topics when defining Linguistics highlighted their inability to conceptualize Linguistics from a broader and global perspective.

- The students' intentions in learning stood as a powerful feature in shaping the learning experience of the students of this study. The students' understanding and interpretation of the learning materials and lectures knowledge and even the subject in general was related to the intentions they had been expressing during the study. In fact, intentions appeared to have had a major effect on the quality of the learning outcomes. The findings reported in Chapters Three and Four illustrated how intentions in tackling the learning materials affected the student's focus of attention to either the message or discrete elements in the materials. Indeed, one of the findings that stood prominent in this study is that when the students' intention is not directed to the message of the lecture or learning materials is because initially it was not their intention. As for the student's conceptions of the subject of linguistics, it has been observed that the majority of the students conceived the subject of linguistics as an imposed subject that did not have direct relevance for their future career. This appeared to be related to their intentions to pass the subject. Thus, one might suggest that the students should be regarded as intentional beings that come to a learning situation in pursuit of their personal goals. These intentions may conflict with those of their teachers or course-designers, which might create a gap between the teacher's intentions and the students' understanding.

In this case, it would be too simplistic to assume that the learners' intentions could alter only if new teaching techniques and strategies are applied in the classroom. In fact, this study has demonstrated how the students might redefine the objectives of the

learning tasks and materials in a way that suits their personal intentions.

- Furthermore, the nature of the prior-experience of the students emerged as a key finding in this study. The different approaches and conceptions brought to new learning situation appeared to be critical to the understanding of the way the students experienced the study of Linguistics in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. It has been found out that the students' prior-conceptions predispose the students to engage or detach themselves from the learning materials. The findings showed that the students in this study started their 2<sup>nd</sup> year experience with vague views of the nature of Linguistics. This seems to have affected the way they conceived the subject as lacking relevance for both their studies in the department of English and their future career. The lack of relevance conceived by these students was found out to have been related to the way they approached linguistics as constituting an imposed subject with information that should be acquired in a ritual way to pass.
- Related to the students' prior-experience, assessment emerged as one of the most powerful contextual features in the learning experience explored in this study. The majority of the students appeared to be strategic in the way they approach Linguistics. Even when the students displayed a higher-level conception, they appeared concerned with their teacher's expectations and intentions.

## **2- Contribution of this Study to Existing Literature:**

The value of this piece of research is in presenting the students' learning conceptions and approaches as being linked to the context of Algerian higher education. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study investigating the students' experience of learning from the phenomenographic research perspective in the Department of English of the University of Algiers 2.

Ramsden (2013), among many other phenomenographers, encouraged the initiation of such studies in different contexts, given that the issues related to learning conceptions and learning approaches are highly context-driven. This investigation was conducted in the natural setting of the classroom involving direct interaction with the participants within normal learning situations. Thus, the findings of this study could be an adequate starting point for further phenomenographic research in our context.

Moreover, it has been argued in the theoretical part of this thesis that phenomenography is quite challenging when it comes to analyzing the extensive written and verbal data. My personal experience in this investigation required a lot of reflection on my part as a researcher to adapt this type of research to the context of my study, which have been explained and justified in various parts of this thesis. Indeed, as could be seen from the various rationales for the methods adopted in this study, methods and frameworks for collecting and analyzing the data were adapted to this context from Western studies. The frameworks for data analysis could be readily adapted by the Algerian researchers willing to dig deeper into the students' learning experience.

Furthermore, throughout my research, the participants have expressed their appreciation as to the opportunity they had to voice their thoughts and personal reflection over their learning and understanding. This phenomenographic experience should have helped the students to bring their difficulties, conceptions and strengths and weaknesses to their consciousness. Despite the fact that this was not the objective, it was observed that the students found it quite unexpected that lecturers might invite them to reflect on their ideas about academic subjects. This brought to my consciousness the distance existing between the world of teachers and the world of learners in academic contexts. This perceived enthusiasm on the part of their teacher to

be genuinely interested in their personal views was quite surprising for the students, but at the same time very rewarding.

### **3- Suggestions for Further Research:**

The value of this research lies in the fact that it presents a foundation for other researchers to reflect over further investigations that might create more effective learning-teaching environments.

This study brought up several other important issues that could be investigated in the future. Despite that the current study has focused on learning for reasons explained in the rationale of the study, it seems inevitable to link the two worlds together if learning has to be realistically considered. A subsequent research would be to involve both teaching and learning at the same time using a phenomenographic point of view.

Because of the complexities of the worlds of teaching and learning, most of phenomenographic studies have tended to emphasize one at a time for large scale studies. It is true that the findings of this type of research could have interesting implications in learning/teaching, however, because phenomenographic studies are highly affected by contextual factors, it would be quite beneficial to investigate the two within the same learning/teaching situation. In fact, one of the main issues that were increasingly growing is the need to consider the teacher's experience of teaching along the students' experience of learning. The various ways the students conceive their learning may also be related to the teachers' conceptions of teaching. It would be quite insightful to see any correlation between the teacher's and the students' experiences in the same learning-teaching context.

The findings of this research encourage also the investigation of the students' experiences of studying other essential academic subjects of studies; especially those that are considered as problematic for the students. These could be Literature and civilization. Given that Linguistics was extensively

investigated in this study, a comparison between the students' conceptions of and approaches to studying these academic subjects would definitely be helpful in designing more learner-centered syllabuses.

The researcher's experience in investigating the students' conceptions and approaches when dealing with the activity of reading and writing provided an excellent opportunity to tackle these two main academic activities in depth. However given that the main research problem was to investigate these two activities in relation to Linguistics studies, they were not thoroughly studied as independent skills in the context of this study. Thus I highly suggest the investigation of reading and writing as important academic skills from the social constructivist point of view.

Related to the social-constructivist view of learning, one of the main findings of the present study is the idea of conceptual change that was found out to be present in the students' learning experience. The issue which might be considered is the to look deeper at the change in learning conceptions and approaches to look at any possible factors affecting a qualitative change in the students' understanding of academic subjects as well as the way that this might affect their change in their leaning approaches. A follow-up study that investigates the students' change in conceptions and approaches in more advanced stages of their studies would be highly insightful.

The students' lack of interest and lack of relevance they associated with their learning emerged as significant features in the students' accounts. This suggests a need for research in this issue in the context of the present study. Therefore looking deeper into this issue is quite relevant to our context.

#### **4- Personal Reflections:**

When I started my PhD research, I directly thought of conducting qualitative interpretive research with the aim of developing my research skills. In my research experience prior to PhD, I had engaged in was experimental type of

research. I had no experience in designing conducting and analyzing qualitative interpretive research, let alone phenomenographic type of research. This choice was quite challenging for me as a research; yet extremely beneficial in increasing my knowledge about decisions to make as to the collection of data as well as their analysis and interpretation.

Reflecting over my own experience in engaging in phenomenographic research was quite challenging, especially in the early stages of the present study. Given that very little studies have been carried out in contexts similar to ours, I had to engage in long reflection on the theoretical frame that might best dig deep into our students' learning experience. A lot of thinking and adaptations have been reflected on when farming this study. This journey was essentially beneficial to be to develop my skills as an interviewer.

Being a novice interviewer, I was not really sure of the way the interview sessions could best be conducted. Reflecting over this experience, I can say that careful listening and probing is what counts. Phenomenography is about engaging the students into expressing their thought and understanding of their own learning experience the conduct, analysis and interpretation of the interviews data proved to be significantly challenging. This engaged me in ongoing and enduring reflection

Besides, throughout this investigation I was increasingly becoming aware of the importance of my own conceptions of teaching, learning, and research. What is my own personal understanding of these three essential activities in my experience as a teacher-researcher. My conceptions and approaches are inevitably shaping my understanding of what research involves and how it should be conducted. Questions like 'what', 'how' and 'why' have also become essential in both my teaching and research activities.

## **5- Concluding Observations:**

The findings of the present research supports the view in the literature that research into learning experiences within disciplinary context would reveal invaluable insights into the student's learning. What emerges from this study is features might be taken as characterizing the learning conceptions and approaches within the discipline of Linguistics.

It is also critical to understand the contextual factors that affected the students' experience of learning. The research reported in this dissertation here serves a strong reminder that learning is not linear, that students have complex mixture of intentions while tackling learning in natural contexts. Many practitioners are unaware of this complexity in their student's experience of learning and tend to blame their students for laziness and lack of motivation. While the impact of these factors cannot be denied, at least in cognitive psychology, the findings of this phenomenographic study suggested that an alternative way to understand the students learning is to pay attention not only to how the students are affected by the context, but also how they act on this context.



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# APPENDICES



## **Appendix 2: Approaches to Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST)**

**This questionnaire is an adapted version of one of the highly recommended and frequently utilized research tools in phenomenographic studies about university students' study conceptions and approaches. It contains a background information section that was not meant to be exploited, but instead to be able to select more or less a homogenous group of students for collecting data.**

**Dear student,**

This questionnaire has been designed to allow you describe how you go about learning in the Department of English in general and Content modules in particular. In responding to the questions, think in terms of these particular lecture courses. Please, answer truthfully all the questions and make sure you give a response to every item/question.

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### **Background information**

Age (please circle):                      18-23              24- 30              31 and more  
Gender (please circle):                      Male                      Female  
Is English your first university degree?      Yes                      No



### **Section A: What is the aim of learning?**

According to you, what is the aim of learning at university? Consider each of the following statements carefully, and then put a circle around the number that best describe your point of view as indicated in the following: 5 = *strongly agree*

4 = *agree*

3 = *neutral or undecided*

2 = *disagree*

1 = *strongly disagree*

<b>Questionnaire Items</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
a) The aim of learning is to memorize information taught in the course.	5	4	3	2	1
b) The aim of learning is to acquire facts and information to build more knowledge about the subject matter.	5	4	3	2	1
c) The aim of learning is to achieve high scores and to get degree.	5	4	3	2	1
d) The aim of learning is to prepare the students for professional life.	5	4	3	2	1
e) The aim of learning is to understand the course and be able to use information in real life.	5	4	3	2	1
f) The aim of learning is to understand to develop one's personality.	5	4	3	2	1

## **Section B: Approaches to studying:**

The next part of this questionnaire asks you to indicate your relative agreement or disagreement with comments again made by other students. Please, work through the comments, giving your immediate response.

Please, work your way through the questionnaire quite quickly, making sure that you give a response to every item. It is also very important that you answer all the questions by putting a circle around the number that best describes your point of view as indicated in the following:

- 5 = *strongly agree*  
 4 = *agree*  
 3 = *neutral or undecided*  
 2 = *disagree*  
 1 = *strongly disagree*

<b>Questionnaire Items</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
1) I often have trouble in understanding the things I'm supposed to remember.	5	4	3	2	1
2) When I'm reading handouts or my notes, I try to find out for myself exactly what the teacher means.	5	4	3	2	1
3) I organize my study time carefully to make the best use of it.	5	4	3	2	1
4) Much of the work in the content modules is little interesting or relevant.	5	4	3	2	1
5) I work steadily throughout the semester rather than leave it all until the last minute.	5	4	3	2	1
6) Before tackling a classroom activity or homework, I first try to think about the purpose behind it.	5	4	3	2	1
7) I'm pretty good at studying whenever I need to.	5	4	3	2	1
8) Much of what I'm studying makes little sense for me: it's like unrelated bits and pieces.	5	4	3	2	1
9) I put a lot of effort studying because I have to do well.	5	4	3	2	1
10) When I'm working on a new topic presented by the teacher for the first time, I try to think how all the ideas fit together.	5	4	3	2	1
11) I don't find it at all difficult to motivate myself.	5	4	3	2	1
12) Often I find myself questioning things I hear in the lectures or read in related books.	5	4	3	2	1

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Does not apply	Disagree	Strongly disagree
14) Often I feel there is a big amount of material we have to cope with.	5	4	3	2	1
15) Ideas in lectures, handouts or related books and articles often make me constantly think about myself.	5	4	3	2	1
16) During lectures, I'm not really sure what's important to note, and so I take notes of all I can.	5	4	3	2	1
17) When I read outside the classroom, I examine the details carefully to see how they fit in with what the lecturer explains.	5	4	3	2	1
18) I'm often not quite sure about whether I'll be able to cope with studying in the Department of English.	5	4	3	2	1
13) I think I'm quite organized when it comes to revising for my exams.	5	4	3	2	1

### **Section C: Preferences for different types of course and teaching**

Please indicate your personal preferences of the types teaching. Use the following:

- 5 = *strongly agree*
- 4 = *agree*
- 3 = *neutral or undecided*
- 2 = *disagree*
- 1 = *strongly disagree*

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a) Lecturers who tell us exactly what to put down in our notes.	5	4	3	2	1
b) Lecturers who encourage us to think for ourselves and show us how they themselves think.	5	4	3	2	1
c) Exams that allow me that I've thought about the course materials for myself.	5	4	3	2	1

d) Exams or test that need only the materials provided in our lecture notes.	5	4	3	2	1
e) Courses in which it is made very clear exactly what information we need to learn during the term and what books provide us with such information.	5	4	3	2	1
f) Courses where we're encouraged to read around the subject a lot for ourselves.	5	4	3	2	1
g) Lecturers who challenge me and provide information which goes beyond the lectures.	5	4	3	2	1
h) Lecturers who give us definite facts and information which can easily be learned.	5	4	3	2	1

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COLLABORATION**

### **Appendix 3: Text-Based Task(1)**

**Instruction:** Read the text below, and then do the task on page 2

Language has long been thought of as a process of imitation and reinforcement. Children learn to speak, in the popular view, by copying the utterances heard around them, and by having their responses strengthened by the repetitions that adults provide. In recent year, it has become clear that this principle will not explain all the facts of language development. Children do imitate a great deal, especially in learning sounds and vocabulary; but little of their grammatical ability can be explained in this way.

When children encounter such irregular grammatical past-tense forms as went and took, or such plural forms as mice and sheep there is stage when they replace these forms based on the regular patterns of language. They say such things as wented, taked, lices, and sheeps. Evidently, children assume that grammatical usage is regular, and try to work out for themselves what the forms 'ought' to be- a reasoning process known as analogy. They could not have learned these forms by a process of imitation. Adults do not go around saying such things as wented and sheeps!

In addition, children seem unable to imitate adult grammatical constructions exactly, even when invited to do so 'elicited imitation'. The best -known demonstration of this principle in action is the dialogue reported by the American psycholinguist, David McNeil (1933) where a child proved unable to use a pattern, even though the parent presented the correct adult model several times:

Child: Nobody don't like me.

Mother: No, say nobody likes me'.

Child: Nobody don't like me.

(eight repetitions of this dialogue)

Mother: No, now listen carefully: say 'Nobody likes me'.

Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

The child at this point in its learning of grammar was clearly not ready to use the 'single negative' pattern found in this dialect of English. Such examples suggest that language acquisition more a matter of maturation than of imitation.

*Source: Crystal, D (2010) Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language. Cambridge, CUP. Page 236*



#### **Appendix 4: Text-Based Task (2)**

**Instruction:** Read the text below and then do the task on page 2.

The most obvious characteristic of verbal linguistic behavior is that it is stimulus-free and innovative. Repetition of fixed phrases is rarity; it is only under exceptional and quite uninteresting circumstances that one can seriously consider how 'situational context' determines what is said. The notion that linguistic behavior consists of responses to 'stimuli' is as much a myth as the idea that it is a matter of habit and generalization. To maintain such assumptions in the face of the actual facts, we must deprive the terms 'stimulus' and 'response' of any practical or precise meaning. This property of being innovative and stimulus-free is what I refer to by the term 'creative aspect of language use'. It is a property of language that was described in the seventeenth century and that serves as one cornerstone for classical linguistic theory, but that has gradually forgotten in the development of modern linguistics.

Any theory of language must come to grips with this fundamental property of normal language use. A necessary but not sufficient step towards dealing with this problem is to recognize that the native speaker of a language has internalized a generative grammar – a system of rules that can be used in new and untried combinations to form new sentences and to assign. Once this fact has become clear, the immediate task of the linguist is likewise clarified. He must try to discover the rules of this generative grammar and the underlying principles and the basis on which it is organized.

The native speaker of a language has internalized a generative grammar in the sense just described, but he obviously has no awareness of this fact or of the properties of this grammar. A generative grammar of a language is a theory of a speaker's intrinsic linguistic competence. If correct, it expresses the principles that determine the intrinsic correlation of sound and meaning in the language in question. It thus serves as a component of a theory that can accommodate the creative aspect of language use.

Source: Chomsky, N (1966) "*Linguistic Theory*". In Smolinsky, F (ed) (1993): Landmarks of American Language and Linguistics Vol 1. Washington DC), Page 264.





**Appendix 5: Allocation of the students along the prior-approaches and  
Prior-conceptions of studying Linguistics**

Students Codes	Prior-approach	Prior-conception
1	B	B
2	D	D
3	A	B
4	B	B
5	A	A
6	A	D
7	A	B
8	A	B
9	A	A
10	A	B
11	B	B
12	B	C
13	A	A
14	A	B
15	B	C
16	D	D
17	A	A
18	A	A
19	D	D
20	D	A

Students codes	Prior-approach	Prior-conception
21	A	A
22	B	C
23	A	A
24	B	B
25	A	A
26	A	A
27	A	A
28	B	C
29	A	A
30	B	B
31	A	A
32	A	A
33	A	A
34	D	D
35	A	A
36	B	B
37	A	A
38	A	A
39	A	A
40	A	B

## **Appendix 6: The Content of the Second Year Linguistics Course**

Université of d'Alger 2 "Aboulkacem Saadallah"  
Faculté des Langues Etrangères



Département d'Anglais  
Intitulé de la licence: Anglais  
Intitulé de la matière: Linguistic Theories  
(2015-2016)

### **Course objectives:**

By the end of the course, the students will be able to:

- Distinguish between scientific and pre-scientific study of language.
- Understand the concepts of modern linguistics as developed by the different schools of linguistics.
- Understand the principles of the main European and American linguistics theories and schools.

### **S3 Course Outline**

<p><b>1) <u>Traditional Grammar: (2 weeks)</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1.1- Traditional Grammar in the classical period<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1.1.1- The contribution of the Greek philosophers to the study of language</li><li>1.1.2- The contribution of the Romans to the study of language</li></ul></li><li>1.2- Traditional grammar in Renaissance</li></ul>
<p><b>2) <u>The Pre-Modern Period: (3 weeks)</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>2.1- Indian tradition</li><li>2.2- Comparative philology</li></ul>
<p><b>3) <u>Schools of linguistics: (5 weeks)</u></b></p> <p><b>3.1- <i>European structural linguistics</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>3.1.1- Foundation of modern linguistics principles</li><li>3.1.2- Saussure's Dichotomies</li></ul> <p><b>3.2- <i>American structural linguistics:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>3.2.1- The rise of structuralism in America</li><li>3.2.2- Behaviourism</li></ul>



### Course Objectives

By the end of the course, the students are expected to:

- Understand the main European and American schools of linguistics.
- Develop the basic tools of syntactic and morphological analysis that will enable them to describe and analyse English sentences using a generative approach.
- Notice how the two approaches to syntactic analyses function so as to be able to compare and contrast them.
- Develop a basic understanding of the influence of linguistic schools on psycholinguistic theories.

### S4 Course Outline

#### 1) Transformational Generative Grammar: (5 weeks)

- 1.1- From Behaviourism to Mentalism
- 1.2- Transformational generative grammar:
  - 1.2.1- Phrase structure rules
  - 1.2.2- Transformational rules
  - 1.2.3- Deep/ surface structures
  - 1.2.4- Competence/ performance

#### 2) The Structuralist-Functional School (Prague School) (1week)

#### 3) Functional Grammar: (4 weeks)

- 3.1- Features of Functional Grammar
- 3.2- Halliday's view of grammar:
  - 3.2.1- Systematic grammar
  - 3.2.2- Meta-functions
- 3.3- Text and context in Halliday's model of language

## ABSTRACT IN ARABIC

### ملخص

الدراسة الحالية هي تحقيق فينوميونوغرافي في تجربة الطلاب في دراسة اللغويات. كان يهدف إلى التحقيق أولاً في التصور المسبق للطلاب والنهج السابقة لدراسة اللغويات ؛ ثانيًا ، تجربة الطلاب القائمة على النصوص في دراسة المهام اللغوية ، وثالثًا ، طبيعة دراسة اللسانيات الناشئة من تجربة الطلاب في التعلم في سياق الدراسة الحالية. اشتملت الدراسة على مشاركة 40 طالبًا جامعيًا ، جميعهم مسجلين في السنة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الجزائر 2. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نماذج البحث البنائية الاجتماعية والظاهرية. الفكرة المركزية للبناء الاجتماعي والفينوميونوغرافيا هي أنه لا يمكن القول بأن المتعلمين الأفراد لديهم نفس نشاط التعلم لمجرد أنهم مروا بنفس موقف التعلم (Entwistle and Ramsden، 1988؛ Prosser and Trigwell، 1999). يؤكد البحث من منظور ظاهري على التباين الموجود بين الطلاب الذين أقوم بتصورهم والتعامل مع موضوع معين من الدراسة أو المهام أو المعرفة بشكل عام (Entwistle، 1997). باتباع الطريقة والفينوميونوغرافية ، تم جمع البيانات بشكل أساسي من خلال المقابلات، وتم إجراء جلستين من المقابلات في بداية الدراسة الحالية والمراحل الختامية لها. بالإضافة إلى المقابلات، تم إجراء البيانات التي تم جمعها باستخدام طرق بحث ظاهرية أخرى معترف بها على نطاق واسع؛ كانت هذه أسئلة مفتوحة، والتي أشركت الطلاب في التفكير في فهمهم لعلم اللغة من خلال مهمة الكتابة في الفصل الدراسي؛ استبيان تم استخدامه للحصول على مناهج الطلاب المعتمدة؛ وأخيرًا، ملخصات الطلاب لنصين أكاديميين.

مرت عملية جمع البيانات بمرحلتين رئيسيتين: في المرحلة الأولى من الدراسة، كان الغرض هو جمع البيانات حول المفاهيم الأولية للطلاب والنهج السابقة لدراسة اللغويات. اشتملت على استخدام المقابلات والسؤال المفتوح والاستبيان. استهدفت المرحلة الأولى من الدراسة التجربة النصية لدراسة مقياس اللغويات. تضمنت جمع البيانات أثناء دراسة الفصل الدراسي، باستخدام مهام القراءة والكتابة النصية، وبعد الفصل الدراسي، باستخدام المقابلات. تم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها من أدوات البحث المختلفة من منظور ظاهري. على سبيل المثال، كان الهدف هو تصوير مختلف فئات الوصف التي تصف خبرة الطلاب السابقة والخبرة المستندة إلى النصوص في

اللغويات. كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الخبرة السابقة في دراسة علم اللغة تختلف بين المستوى الأدنى إلى المستوى الأعلى ومفاهيم ومقاربات الدراسة الأكثر تعقيداً. في المستوى الأدنى توجد مفاهيم علم اللغة كتراكم لمعلومات لغوية غير مرتبطة بهدف إعادة الإنتاج لتلبية احتياجات التقييم. النهج المعتمد في السطح الأول ينطوي على استخدام استراتيجيات التعلم الاحتفاظ والحفظ. الهدف الأساسي هو الحصول على علامة النجاح. في المستوى الأعلى، كشف الطلاب عن تجربة تعليمية أكثر جدوى حيث كان الطلاب يبحثون بنشاط عن المعنى والتأمل في المعرفة اللغوية. كان نهجهم متماسكاً بشكل عميق حيث كانت الإستراتيجية السائدة تتمثل في ربط أجزاء مختلفة من المعلومات بقصد تحقيق فهم شامل ليس فقط للمعلومات التي تم الحصول عليها خلال المحاضرات أو المهام المنفصلة، ولكن أيضاً الخاصة بدورة اللغويات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفينومينوغرافيا ، تجربة التعلم ، مفاهيم التعلم ، مناهج التعلم ، اللغويات.