Motivation and interest in learning a foreign language during the COVID-19 pandemic

Maitri Dand & Natasha Maria Gomes

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional mode of classes for those studying French as a foreign language as lockdowns were imposed in various countries. Courses that were previously in conventional face-to-face mode changed to online mode. At the same time, several reports have indicated a surge in interest in language learning. This study inquires into the perceived changes in motivation and interest to study French as a foreign language prior to and during the pandemic of 2020-2021. It highlights learners' perceptions of the online mode of learning. The data was collected through a survey having closed and open-ended questions. The findings of this study could be helpful to teachers and institutions when preparing the delivery of course content and choosing a mode of instruction.

Keywords: motivation, interest, online education, COVID-19 pandemic, FLE.

Introduction

According to UNESCO's Director-General Audrey Azoulay, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ''Never before have we witnessed educational disruption on such a large scale (UNESCO, 2020).'' Due to worldwide lockdowns and quarantines, various educational institutions, from schools to universities, had closed campuses which meant that students returned home (UNESCO, 2020). As a result, the academic calendar worldwide has been thrown into disarray. At the same time, several reports have indicated a surge in interest in language learning on online learning platforms (Hardach, 2020; Hopp, H., & Thoma, D., 2020). Educational institutions in several countries shifted from the traditional classroom setting to the emergency remote online mode of education.

A study by Chertoff et al showed that COVID-19 has adverse effects on education, including learning disruptions, decreased access to education and research facilities, job losses and high student debts (Chertoff et al, 2020). The findings also show that many educators and students relied on technology to ensure continued learning online during the Coronavirus pandemic. However, online education was hindered by poor infrastructure, electricity, network, power, and lack of requisite skills to use tools among others (Srivastava et al, 2020). They have shown that the shift to the online mode of education has led to a reduction in motivation levels due to various reasons ranging from lack of devices to lack of personal interaction. Our study attempts to shed light on the learners' motivation and interest to learn French as a foreign language, identify strategies used and highlight how they have adapted to online learning. The findings of this study have implications for the teachers' and institutions' choice of the mode of instruction for a wide range of subjects, not only language learning.

The operational definitions of this study are as follows:

- Traditional class/education refers to classes in the physical mode where a learner needs to go to a location/campus to attend class. The class essentially has a physical presence of an instructor.

- Online class/education refers to classes in the virtual mode where a learner attends classes using a device and internet connection. Unless stated otherwise, online class refers to emergency remote online classes, online courses offered on various platforms and by various institutions. The class may have a synchronous or asynchronous presence of the instructor or a more knowledgeable other.

Literature review

Motivation drives a person to achieve certain goals and is often said to be a catalyst in performance. Interest is linked to the motivational process (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). The self-determination theory classifies motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic:

> "*The most basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan and Deci, 2000)"*.

There are individual differences in motivational factors. What motivates person A may not motivate person B. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a person needs to satisfy basic physiological, safety and social needs before self-esteem and self-actualisation needs (Maslow, 1954). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, even in developed countries, people needed to meet their basic physiological and safety needs with quarantines, access to medical facilities, etc. Various sectors, including the education sector, have had to adapt.

There have been several studies on the challenges and opportunities of emergency remote teaching and online learning (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020, Bhagat, Sarbottam, 2020), students' perception and preference for online education during the COVID -19 pandemic in India (Prasad et al., 2021, Mondal et al, 2021) and the rest of the world (Grether S et al, 2020). With regards to learning a foreign language, studies have focused on student motivation in relation to the use of various tools, platforms and modes of instruction (Bratel et al, 2021) and (Klimova, 2021), research revealing that students do not perceive improvement in language skills by studying purely online. While students perceive online learning as effective, the traditional face-to-face class cannot be replaced (Klimova, 2021). However, there are limited studies on learners' perceptions and preferences of learning a foreign language across various age groups, across institutions and on learners who are learning a language autonomously using a range of online educational media.

Methods and methodology

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How has the shift from the traditional classroom mode to the online mode of learning affected the motivation and interest of the learners?

2. What are the preferred modes of learning and frequency of classes?

3. What are the factors that influence learning?

4. What are the resources and techniques used to learn French as a foreign language?

To find an answer to the research questions, we used a mixed approach. A qualitative analysis of data helps in identifying nuances in the perceptions of a small group of people. The study was conducted using a 'basic statistical method' (Ali and Bhaskar, 2016), where the research steps were planned and designed, and then the data was subsequently collected, analysed and discussed.

A survey questionnaire was designed having some demographic questions, closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions enabled participants to describe and express their opinions about learning and their interest in the language during the pandemic. Through the questions, participants were asked to compare and contrast their experiences of learning a language and their perceptions of interest and motivation prior to and during the pandemic. The answers obtained from the qualitative method were analysed with descriptive statistics. A Google form was shared via emails and social media with people studying French as a foreign language before and/or during the pandemic. Participants were informed that the data collected would be confidential and anonymised. The data was collected from August 2021 to November 2021 after which Microsoft Excel was used to analyse the data. Duplicate entries were removed, outliers were filtered and codes were assigned to each participant.

Findings and discussion

Demography

The survey recorded 37 replies, out of which 70.27% (n=26) were females while only 29.27% (n=11) were males. As indicated in Figure 1, 83.78% (n=31) of participants were below 25 years.
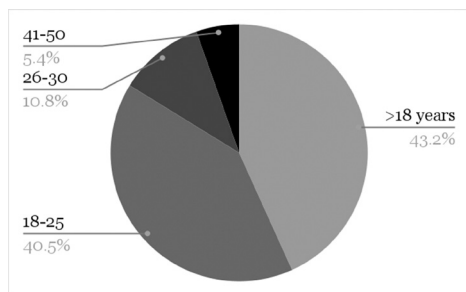

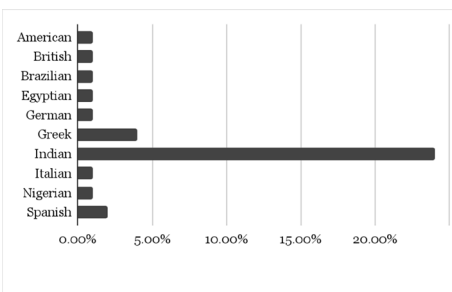**Fig. 1.** Age distribution of the participants


Fig. 2. Nationality of the participants

64.86% (n=24) of participants were Indian (Fig. 2.) followed by 24.31% (n=9) who were European. The participants reported that they spoke languages like English, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Italian, Konkani, Portuguese, Greek, Bengali, Galician, Kutchi and French.

As indicated in Fig. 3, at the time of the study, 48.64% % (n=18) of participants had or were enrolled in bachelor's programmes, followed by 37.83% (n=14) in schools. Since the learners are in different age groups and have different levels of education, they have been learning French in different places; the survey shows participants learnt French at the following institutions: 35.13% (n=13) at schools, followed by 16.21% (n=6) *'Alliance*

Française', and 10% (n=4) in universities, along with 18.91% (n=7) other private institutions/ coaching classes. 5.4% (n=2) have reported enrolling for classes online. 2.70% (n=1) stated that they were learning the language while staying in France. The data revealed that the participant's self-reported levels of French ranged from an A1 to C2 (Alliance Française, 2020) as indicated in Fig. 4.
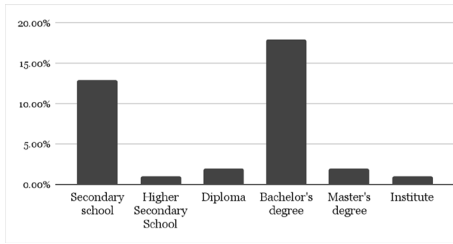
Fig. 3. Current/highest education levels of the participants
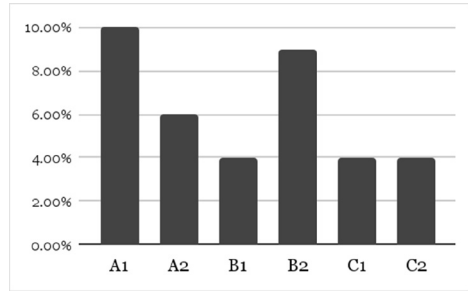
Fig. 4. Self-reported DELF/DALF levels of the participants

Motivations for learning French prior to the pandemic

27.02% (n=10) of participants indicated that they chose to learn French as it was a mandatory subject in their schools or their respective learning institute. Several surveys conducted by a school (Middlebury language school, 2020) show that learning a foreign language in schools has become compulsory as it adds value to students' learning, boosts memory and even enhances multitasking in school-going children.

Furthermore, there are also participants who started learning the language for their personal interest in the language. 16.21% (n=6) of learners were drawn towards French for the benefit of living in a francophone country, or towards the culture, food and fashion of France.

In addition, 13.51% (n=5) of participants reported that they learn the language as it is often linked to better employment opportunities and consequently a higher earning income. 8.10% (n=3) mention that they learned/are learning the language as they wanted to work in the domain of diplomacy and as it is beneficial for their future. The French language is perceived to be like a shining star in their resume and would help them in their future endeavours. However, an equal percentage (8.10%) of them continued learning as they liked the language and the learning process, alongside all the benefits they were getting from the language learning. *"It was compulsory at the high school, but then later I started liking the language and continued learning the same (R4)"*[1]. 13.51% (n=5) of participants started learning French as they wanted to do something new and interesting and learning a language seemed like a good way investment and hobby. 66% (n=18) of participants started learning French before COVID-19, *i.e.,* prior to March 2020, while 34% (n=9) started learning during the pandemic *i.e.,* after March 2020.

1.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R4 *"C'était obligatoire au lycée, après j'ai bien aimé et j'ai continué)"*

Interest in learning during the Pandemic

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education created a hindrance and devastating effect on people's motivation and interest in learning (Onyema et al 2020). Despite the inconvenience, 43.24% (n=16) of participants in our survey reported that nothing had changed with regard to their learning during the pandemic. They were neutral in terms of the change and the mode of learning. They mentioned interest and motivation to learn/improve their level of French. *"It was during the pandemic when I started to take French seriously, and I discovered several strategies to improve my French speaking, reading and listening skills (R20)"*. The shift from offline/traditional classes to online learning made them more interested in the language and they wanted to go beyond the traditional mode of learning which in turn made them more dedicated and serious about learning the language.

29.72% (n=11) of participants reported that they have adapted positively to learning French during the pandemic: some mentioned that their level of interest in French was higher during the pandemic in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. Participants reasoned that the spurt in interest levels was due to the availability of free time, *"Confined at home, having not much to do during the initial phase of lockdown made me want get back to french (R26)"*, and the subsequent discovery and access to more resources, participants learnt the language with different online methods, as mentioned by one of the participants *"I tried to read in French and listen to podcasts or watch movies, since I didn't have a face-to-face French class (R6)"*[2].

3.7% (n=1) mentioned that the increase in access to e-learning made them interested in learning; as mentioned by one of the participants, *"Increased the use of online resources (R30)"*[3] and 3.7% (n=1) stated that as they were living in a francophone country, they got interested in learning the language, as mentioned *"In Italy I didn't feel like it, but when I arrived in France that changed (R1)"*[4]. 8.10% (n=3) wanted to continue learning during the pandemic as perfecting their language skills would add value to their professional profiles. *"The desire to appear for the C2 level exams despite the difficult conditions (R14)"*[5].

On the contrary, the shift negatively affected 13.5% (n=5) of the participants, as they lost interest and motivation while learning in an online mode. They even mention that they had to learn from a computer which made the language less enjoyable: *"I was used to many years of in-person teaching. Now I had to do everything from my computer, which made it less interactive and interesting (R31)"*.

Preferred mode of learning and frequency of classes

Participants were exposed to various modes of learning: online and offline. 62.16% (n=23) of participants preferred learning in a traditional classroom setup and 24.32% (n=9) indicated

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2.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R6 *"J'ai essayé de lire en français et d'écouter des podcasts ou regarder des films, comme je n'avais pas de cours de français en présentiel"*.
3.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R30, *"Augmenter l'utilisation des ressources en ligne"*.
4.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R1, *"En Italie j'avais pas trop envie, lorsque je suis arrivé en France ça a changé"*.
5.   Translated from English to French as mentioned in the survey by R14, *"Le désir de me présenter aux examens du niveau C2 en dépit des conditions difficiles"*.

a preference for an online mode of learning. Participants mentioned that traditional offline classes facilitated understanding as they could concentrate more, interact freely with faculty and classmates and stay focused. Some participants prefer online classes as it helps them better: they can access and attend classes from anywhere, and one of the participants even mentions *"Due to the rise of the internet and new technologies, you have access to a quality of education whenever and wherever you want (R23)"*.

51.35% (n=19) of participants were undecided about the change in their interest in learning the language online during the pandemic. While 32.43% (n=12) of participants said that the shift did not change their interest in learning the language. 16.21% (n=6) responded positively indicating that their interest in learning French had improved.

35.13% (n=13) choose to have classes several times a week. The participants prefer to have several classes a week as it is more effective, they can practise the language more often which helps them stay connected with the language. According to them, irrespective of the mode of classes, the frequency of classes is preferred as it exposes them more to the language. *"Having the classes multiple times a week helps me not lose touch of the language (R25)"*, mentions one of the participants.

32.43% (n=12) choose to learn in a self-paced setup. A substantial number of participants prefer to have self-paced courses as it is easier for them to access the content at their own time. Moreover, it helps them in creating their own speed according to their coping abilities and understanding. Participants have mentioned that attending regular classes and paying attention in the class also helps them in focusing. As mentioned by a participant *"Because it allows me to develop my own connection with the language and take the necessary time to develop it further (R13)"*[6].

13.51% (n=5) of participants prefer having weekend classes. Despite weekends not being the primary choice, the participants who choose the same mentioned that it's easier to attend classes on weekends as they had other priorities during the week (work and/or other subject specialisations) and they could devote some time only to the weekend for learning the language.

Factors that influence learning

56.75% (n=21) indicated that the support of their teachers motivated them and 24.32% (n=9) of participants stated that their family was supportive. 13.51% (n=5) of participants mentioned their friends' support helps them get motivated. While only 18.91% (n=7) of participants mentioned that they were self-motivated. Only 2.70% (n=1) mention that their school supported them and it's the course material/content that motivates them in learning the language. Along with that 2.70% (n=1) mention that having time and a proper space to study and learn plays an important role. The participants indicated various factors that piqued their interest in traditional/online classes.

The above figure shows that the 3 most important factors that influence learning are speaking activities (58%), feedback about your performance (55%), course content (50%), and exploring a new culture/food/places (50%). The recurring factors related to social interaction

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6.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R13 *"Parce que ça me permet de développer mon propre lien avec la langue et prendre le temps nécessaire pour approfondir"*.

like doing group work/exercises (48%), having informal conversations with your friends, and having mini dialogues feature frequently as being vital. It is observed that while learning a language in a non-native context, learners don't have frequent opportunities to speak the language outside the class. Additionally, while learning autonomously through a range of online resources like videos on Youtube or by attending a MOOC, learners may not have ample opportunity to speak the language. Hence, having speaking activities influences interest in learning. During the lockdowns and subsequent restrictions, it is understandable that participants would need to express themselves. This would also enable learners to fulfil their psychological needs which as indicated by Maslow are important in order to attain self-actualisation. These findings echo the findings in several other studies which also conclude that learners want to develop speaking skills (Klimova, 2021; Darancik, 2018), but contradict other studies. While speaking activities make learning more interesting, participants also indicated that receiving feedback about their work performance provided room for improvement. Knowledge about course content created an interest in learning when it met the learners' need to explore new cultures, places and foods.
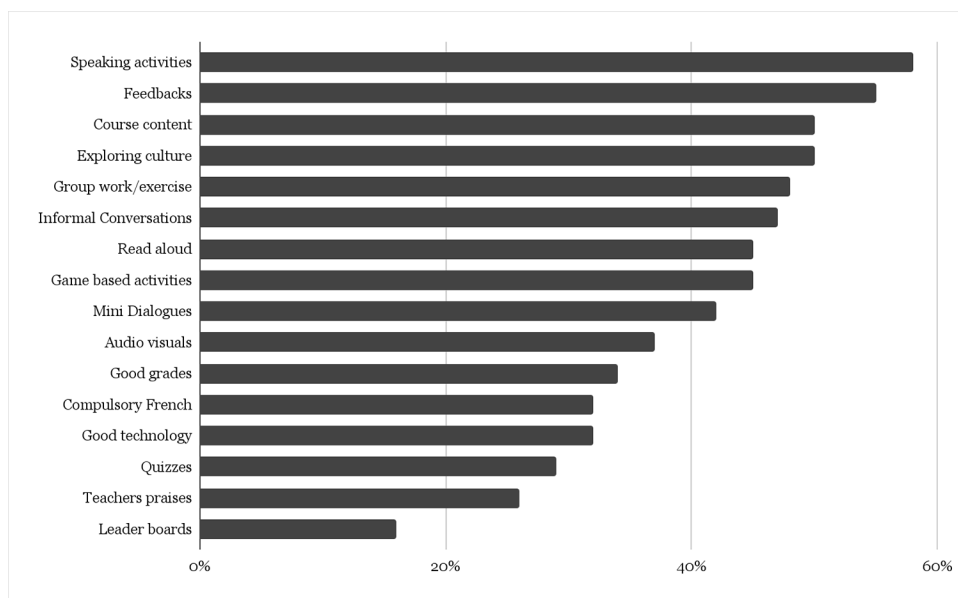

Fig. 5. Factors that piqued participants' interest in while learning a foreign language

The least important factors that contributed to learning are Having leaderboards (16%), Teachers' praises (26%), Having quizzes (29%), good grades in exams (34%), Good internet or technology (32%), Usage of compulsory French in class (32%). For some participants, receiving praise from their teachers gives them a boost while learning the language. The rest of the participants, irrespective of their teachers' recognition, would continue to learn, indicative of being intrinsically motivated. Another perspective could be that people who are extrinsically motivated to learn French do so as this is tied to a long-term goal of better employment opportunities (as mentioned above). Thus, more important than having a good score in the exams is their ability to use the language in real life.

Course content

Knowing what you would be learning and exploring in the class makes you more active and interested in building motivation for learning the language. As shown in Fig. 6, 43.24% (n=16) of participants mentioned that they often get more interested in learning when the course content is provided/ given. While 35.13% (n=13) of participants mentioned that knowing the course content always makes them interested in learning the language. In addition, only 21.62% (n=8) of participants mention that they get interested sometimes due to the course content.
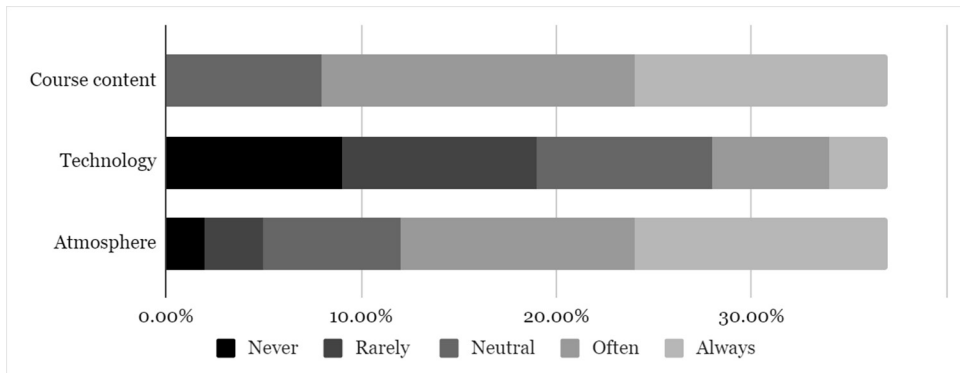
Fig. 6. Course content, Technology and Atmosphere as factors influencing interest as indicated by participants

Technology

The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has made us use technology extensively. Having good access to technology gives one a better opportunity to explore the culture, find more information and attend classes from anywhere. However, for some participants of this study, technology may not be as important a factor as it is assumed that they already have access to good technology, but rather for these participants, what was more critical was speaking/interacting in French. The divided majority *i.e.,* 27.02% (n=10) indicated that they were rarely affected by the lack of technology and 24.32% (n=9) sometimes/occasionally got distracted by the void created by lack of technology. Following suit, 24.32% (n=9) of participants think they very rarely get demotivated by the absence of technology and the internet. On the contrary, 16.21% (n=6) of participants frequently lose interest due to a lack of technology. Despite the current situation and the usage of technology, only 8.10% (n=3) of participants get highly affected due to the unavailability of technology and the internet. This shows how irrespective of technology, the participants still stay motivated and interested in learning French, they barely get affected by the absence of the internet.

Atmosphere

Often, external factors affect our mode of learning the language (Madrid, 1995). 35.13% (n=13) of participants think that the workplace and the atmosphere around the workplace/ study area always affect their mood/interest in learning. 32.43% (n=12) of participants think that their surroundings/ atmosphere around them often affects their interest and concentration

while learning. While 18.91% (n=7) of participants think that it only affects them sometimes. While 8.10% (n=3) of participants disagree and say that it rarely distracts them. However, 5.40% (n=2) of participants never get affected by the atmosphere around them. It was noted that only a few participants indicated being distracted by their surroundings when learning.

Performance

One of the key elements in motivating the students is their performance in the course. Often when they perform better they feel energised to perform even better. 35.13% (n=13) of participants mentioned that their performance is very important when it comes to their motivation in learning the language, followed by 27.02% (n=10) of participants who mentioned that performance is an extremely important factor when it comes to motivation in learning. While 24.32% (n=9) of participants mentioned that performance was not a very important factor for their motivation. 13.51% (n=5) of participants mentioned that performance was moderately important for them when it comes to their interest/motivation while learning the language.
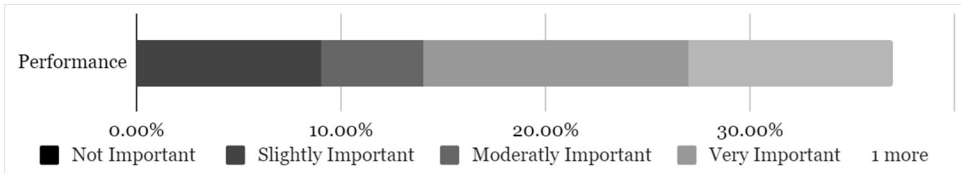

Fig. 7. Performance as a factor influencing interest as indicated by participants

It comes as no surprise that as the levels progress, the difficulties and complexity of the language also increase. Often, learners lose interest as the difficulty increases (Khasinah, 2014). 40.54% (n=15) of participants mentioned that when the difficulty level increases their performance level is average. While 21.61% (n=8) of participants mentioned that they easily lose interest when the difficulty level increases and thus perform poorly. Additionally, 16.21% (n=6) of participants mentioned that their performance level is very poor when there is a change in difficulty level. Meanwhile, 10.81% (n=4) of participants mentioned that their performance is good despite the change in difficulty level and 10.81% (n=4) of participants mentioned that their performance is excellent regardless of the change in the difficulty level and that they do not lose interest in learning.
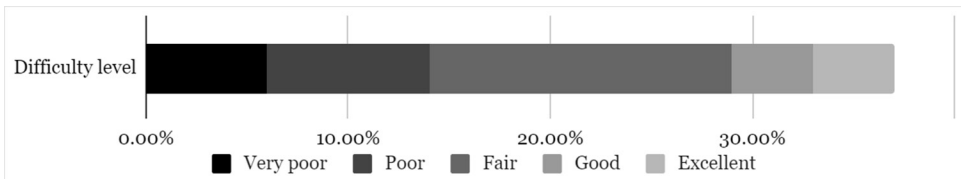

Fig. 8. Difficulty level as a factor influencing interest as indicated by participants

Resources/Techniques used

- **Use of authentic documents:** 37.83% of participants (n=14) mention that they use a lot of online media in French like listening to french music, podcasts, watching videos, tutorials, movies and even watching/listening to french news on various

platforms like Youtube. In this time and age, it is evident that the use of electronics and media is the most common resource to be in touch with the language. 21.62% (n=8) of participants highlighted that reading short stories, journals, lyrics of the song or even reading from their practice book was of a lot of help.

- **Speaking French:** 24.32 % (n=9) of participants mention that they engage in a lot of speaking activities in and out of class. Short dialogues in French and casual conversations with native French speakers and/or classmates help them in gaining confidence that they can communicate in the language. 8.10% (n=3) of participants living in the francophone country due to studies or work say that talking to natives is the best way to learn. Additionally, they say that talking irrespective of making mistakes has helped them a lot when it comes to focusing and learning the language. A participant mentioned, *"Surround myself with French speakers and push myself to speak it even if I make mistakes. (R4)"*[7]. Getting involved and immersing oneself in the language as much as possible, be it with listening, talking, reading or even surrounding yourself with people with similar learning processes helps a lot with motivation and improving yourself when it comes to learning French. *"Immersion as much as possible and variety in subjects and resources (R2)"*.

- **Using corrective methods:** Using corrective methods (Abaya,2014) is not only mentioned by participants living in a francophone country but also by people who have learned French from their own country. Corrective learning- self or external correction helps in improving and learning the language faster. Another corrective method mentioned by one of the participants was having a lot of dictation. It helps in building vocabulary and also you correct yourself or get corrected for the mistakes you make while learning the language.

Conclusion

The participants who filled out the survey had different nationalities, were part of age groups and have been learning French in different modes of learning. The survey shows that participants despite their preference for traditional classroom setup have adopted the use of technology and the pandemic has given them new opportunities to learn the language. Regardless of the difficulties faced by them, they have been motivated and interested in learning french. They shared their options on how the change has affected them and how they have adapted to it along with the resources and techniques used to keep themselves motivated and interested in learning French.

On one hand, the majority of participants state that they were undecided if the shift in the mode of learning has changed their motivation in learning the language. But on the other hand, they also mention that due to the pandemic they became more interested in learning the french language. The participants mentioned that they preferred traditional/offline classes instead of online classes similar to the findings in a previous study (Mondal et al,2021). Additionally, they state a preference for classes several times a week instead of weekend classes. Participants reported that speaking activities, feedback about their performance, course content and exploring a new culture/food/places among others influenced their interest

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7.   Translated to English from French as mentioned in the survey by R4, "M'entourer des francophones et me pousser à le parler même si je fais des erreurs".

to learn the language. The use of authentic resources, corrective methods and speaking the language were some resources and techniques used by the learners to learn French as a foreign language. A limitation of this study is the limited sample size.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study help us make a case for the:

- Selection of blended modes of learning where a part of the course is in a traditional face-to-face mode where learners can communicate freely with each other using contextualisation cues as well as through speaking exercises and subsequently gaining constructive feedback. Moreover, several months into the pandemic, numerous policy documents (Ezyschooling, 2022) highlight that blended learning would be the preferred mode of instruction.

- Creation of course content that is relevant to the needs of the learners. The content would need to be sufficiently contextualised so that it enables learners to explore new cultures, food and places.

- Inclusion of class activities provides learners with opportunities to speak, discuss with their peers and get feedback.

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